DELL BOOK
DELL
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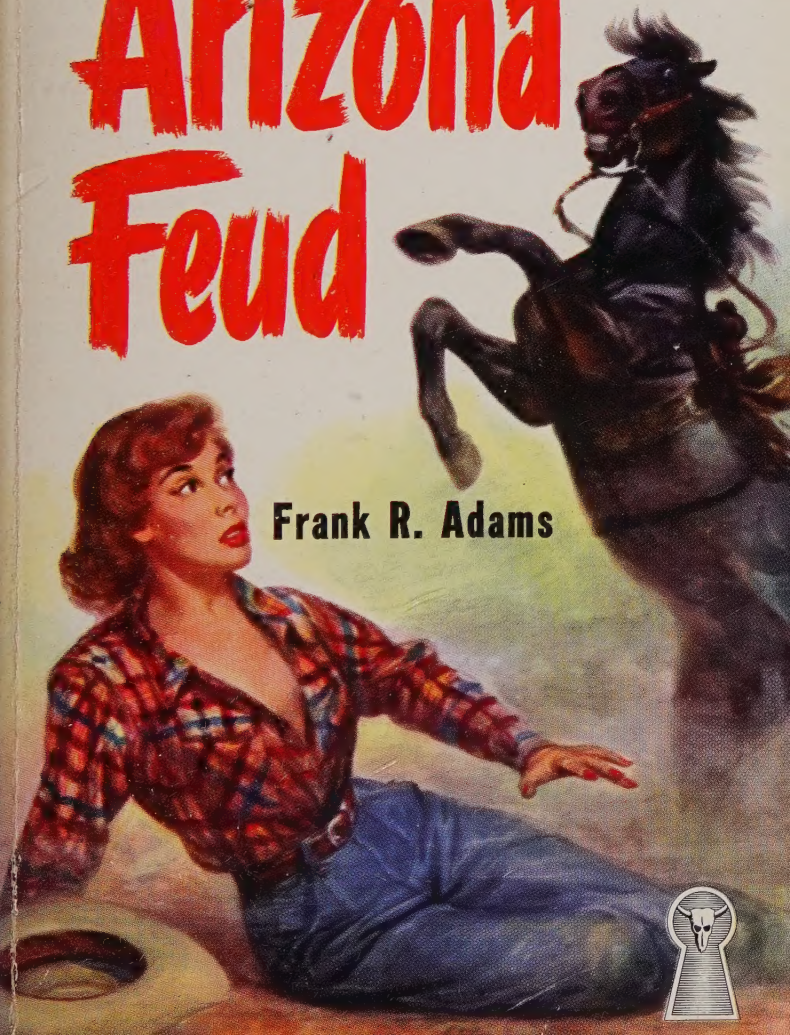
Gun-slinging action and racing pulses . . .

Arizona Feud



Frank R. Adams

DELL MYSTERY
DELL ROMANCE
DELL ADVENTURE
DELL WESTERN

Persons this *Western Story* is about—

STEVE BOYD,

very tall and not handsome, is a fast man with a six-gun, but he learned his draw from a gangster now in Alcatraz. Ex-stunt man, ex-foreign correspondent, Steve is a reporter for a Los Angeles paper. He's a Seeley by blood, and a Seeley doesn't have to look for trouble—it comes to him.

PHOEBE DOVER,

a very attractive woman who struck gold in the literary hills, is nationally known for her best-selling novels and her checkered marital career. She has the lush beauty and physical magnetism that drive men a little mad, and tragedy has dogged her life for a long time.

JOAN GUNNARSON,

Phoebe's fresh young daughter, looks slim and boyish in denims and shirt, but in a white evening dress her golden-brown loveliness is breath-taking and unmistakably feminine.

HANK DOVER,

Phoebe's hulking brother, is head man of the Ring-Bar-X, the vast Dover ranch. His bullying brutality is out of key with his well-tailored clothes.

PAULETTE DUBOIS,

sob sister for a San Francisco newspaper, is the exception that proves the rule that reporters are not usually ornamental. This eye-filling bit of femininity has been the maid of honor at all of Phoebe's weddings.

NELS GUNNARSON,

Phoebe's first husband and Joan's father, has spent 15 years in the insane ward of state's prison for the killing of Rance Seeley, who was Steve's uncle and Phoebe's lover.

(Continued on next page)

Persons this *Western Story* is about—

(Continued from preceding page)

SCOTT SEELEY,
editor of the Outlaw *Weekly Post* and Steve's cousin, is much too thin for his height, but he's a fine man to have on your side in an argument.

SEARS SEELEY,
a handsome lout with a perpetually discontented expression, got his name because he has enough troubles to fill a mail-order catalogue.

DOC BLAUFUS,
the old veterinary, is popular with everybody and has a large unofficial practice among human beings.

SWITCHBOARD SADIE,
night telephone operator, knows everything that goes on in Outlaw after dark. She sets type and writes copy for the *Weekly Post* between calls.

SKIPPY McGINN,
Phoebe's third and "interlocutory" husband, is a prize fighter. A contender for the lightweight title, Phoebe's intimate revelations of their married life have him nearly punch-drunk.

SOSO COSTELLO,
Skippy's manager, holds it against Phoebe that she not only kept his boy awake nights—she made him refined.

ALBANY,
foreman of the Ring-Bar-X, is a champion roper. He learned how on a dude ranch on the Hudson River.

JOHN DOVER,
Phoebe's aged and shrunken father, can still seem tall and menacing when his honor is at stake.

JIM BAXTER,
cow hand at the Ring-Bar-X, is a nice youngster who'd try to be engaged to Joan if they weren't cousins.

ARIZONA FEUD

What this *Western Story* is about—

In Outlaw, Arizona, the Dovers and the Seeleys have been lightheartedly killing each other for half a century. Lately things have been relatively quiet; but the old blood hatred still simmers beneath the surface calm. Anything can happen at rodeo time—and when Steve Boyd, a young Los Angeles newspaperman, arrives in town "anything" begins to happen very fast.

Steve, whose mother was a Seeley, has come to Outlaw, in all innocence, to cover the fourth wedding of Phoebe Dover, nationally known for her best-selling novels and her rapid turnover in husbands. Steve is exposed, in a small way, to Phoebe's fatal charm, and he is exposed in a big way to an odd assortment of newsworthy characters—including Phoebe's outgoing spouse, a slightly punch-drunk pugilist; her first husband, just escaped from 15 years at the state farm; her bloodthirsty brother, he of the low boiling-point; her maid of honor, a wisecracking female reporter; her current extra-curricular boy friend, a colorful cowhand from Albany, N. Y.; and a huge but strangely drowsy prize steer. More to the point, he meets Phoebe's very lovely but very lonely daughter.

Overmuch association with this cockeyed collection

(Continued on next page)

What this *Western Story* is about—

(Continued from preceding page)

angles Steve into a situation that culminates in a grisly murder, of which he is accused. A hair-graying episode with a mob of lynching-bent Dovers and a high regard for his own hide suggest to him that an early solution of the mystery is much to be desired. Abetted by some of the carefree Seeleys, he follows a twisted trail that leads him through jail and coroner's court and into the depths of an abandoned mine—to a crashing climax that brings him near to death.

This absorbing and witty story combines the excitement of swift Western action with the suspense and intrigue of a first-class mystery.

BLOOD HATRED FLARES IN OUTLAW

ARIZONA FEUD

By FRANK R. ADAMS
Author of
"Gunsight Ranch"

Author's Dedication—
For my friend,
NATHAN O. REYNOLDS, M.D.

COVER PAINTING BY BOB STANLEY

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Arizona Feud

Chapter One: SHORT BEERS IN THE LOST JACKASS

"To b'long to one of the first families of Outlaw, Arizona, you got to have a granddaddy who was shot and killed by Sam Seeley."

The half-bald, gossipy bartender paused to see how well his lecture was going over with the very tall, slightly stooped, and guileless-looking stranger with the miniature-size camera slung over his shoulder.

"Is that so?" queried the paying guest, downing a short beer without any particular relish. He was a moderately young man with an earnest expression, who looked as if he seldom found anything diverting enough to make him smile. For the moment he seemed to be computing the acreage of violently pink epidermis on the full-length oil portrait of a naked lady which shared with a long mirror the wall behind the bar. She was quite a large woman and looked uncomfortable upon the spindly-legged gilt couch which had been painted under her—doubtless while she herself had been temporarily jacked up out of the way. He came out of his abstraction with: "Didn't this desperado, Mr. Seeley, ever miss?"

"Not if he was close enough to see the white of your shirttail." There was a faraway look in the bartender's eyes, as if he were scanning local history for additional interesting incidents. "Seems like nobody ever stood up to the Seeleys exceptin' the Dovers. Them two families used to take turns getting each other ready for the undertaker here in Outlaw. The Dovers would reserve the cemetery for the first and third Sundays in the month, and the Seeleys would have it the other two, practically

all through the year except sometimes a couple of months in the middle of winter when it gets too cold to shoot straight."

"Regular feud, huh?" The visitor to town was an obliging audience. He asked the right questions even if he did not seem particularly interested. "What did they scrap over—cattle?"

"At first it was their cattle. Later it was their women."

"Women, you say? Sex rears its ugly head on the range! Fancy that. I thought that west of the Pecos men were men and women were usually schoolmarms."

The bartender wasn't following the customer's flight of fancy very well. Besides, he wanted to get on with his own story. "Females," he said, "are just as hard to make stay put as mavericks, I guess. Of course there ain't been no trouble lately. The last shootin' was when Nels Gunnarson killed Rance Seeley near fifteen year ago."

"Gunnarson?" the stranger repeated. "I thought you said it was the Seeleys and the Dovers who quarreled."

"Gunnarson was a Dover by marriage. His wife was Phoebe Dover, the woman that writes so many books. I read one of 'em once. Made me a little sick—all full of love."

"Lots of books are." The customer took a package of Duke's Mixture out of one pocket and a booklet of wheat-straw papers from another. He measured tobacco into a paper as he said, "Know any more good stories about the Dovers and the Seeleys?"

The bartender watched the fingers of the one hand which rolled the paper and tobacco into a cigarette with a single motion. "What did you say?" he asked absently.

The customer stuck the cigarette to his lower lip, lit a match on his thumbnail, and looked at the bartender soberly. "I said, 'Do you know any more good stories about the Dovers and the Seeleys?' "

The bartender backed away imperceptibly. "Not so

many as you do, I reckon, mister. I thought you was just an Eastern visitor in town here for the home-coming and local-talent rodeo."

As he spoke the bartender jerked his thumb toward the window. The lower half of it was painted an opaque white, but through the top portion could be seen figures on horseback passing in the street—cowboys and cowgirls in fancy shirts, Indians in war paint, the high-seated drivers of roundup chuck wagons, and the ubiquitous and maybe authentic Deadwood stagecoach.

There was a band somewhere at the head of the parade, not a good band but quite noisy. Once in a while when a cowboy discharged a six-gun in the air you could hardly hear it above the beat of the drum which marked the tempo of the music.

Most of the patrons of the Lost Jackass Saloon had crowded through the swinging doors to the street to watch the procession go by.

Those swinging doors parted for a moment. A handsome (weather-beaten style) man of thirty years and around a hundred and sixty-five pounds distributed over six feet of bone entered and walked to the bar. He looked bowlegged, mostly on account of the chaps, and he had on a gaudy silk gaucho shirt with brass-studded leather cuff guards. He also wore a sombrero banded with a gay-colored scarf.

"Scotch, Joe," he said briefly to the bartender.

The stranger laughed.

"Why?" inquired the cowboy coldly.

"No reason. The next one's on me."

"Sorry, but I have an appointment." He looked at his wrist automatically. If there was a watch on it the cuff guard concealed it.

"It's 11:32," contributed the stranger and added, "a.m."

Without bothering to thank the stranger the Techni-

color range rider drank his liquor at one gulp, paid for it, and went toward the side entrance.

There he paused briefly. "Joe!"

"Yes, Albany."

"I don't think you've seen me this morning."

"Neither do I."

"Thanks." Albany took his chaps, sombrero, and gaucho shirt out through the door.

The stranger with the camera looked inquiringly toward Joe. "A member of one of the first families?"

Joe shook his head as he supplied another short beer. "No. He learned his stuff on a dude ranch on the Hudson River."

"New York?'

"New York. That's why they call him Albany."

"Nowadays the West begins somewhere east of Suez, doesn't it?" He mused a moment after emptying the glass. "Never saw a cowpuncher drink Scotch before—for that matter, it's the first time I ever heard of a ranch hand having 'an appointment.' "

"Champeen roper of the United States just the same, so I've heard," declared Joe, setting out in response to a gesture another small glass of light beer. "He's foreman for the Ring-Bar-X right now—that's the Dover outfit.' He leaned confidentially closer to the stranger as he pointed to the small glass of beer. "I hate to discourage business for my boss, but I suppose you know you'd save money by buyin' this stuff in larger quantities."

"I get more kick out of it a little at a time."

"Is that so?" The bartender pretended a sarcastic interest. "How about sipping it through a straw?"

"No," said the customer judicially. "That might be too deadly. You try it."

"Can't, stranger. I don't drink when I'm on duty."

"On duty, huh? My mistake. What do you do?"

Joe gave the man a scowling appraisal, decided that

he must be drunk, even if he didn't look it, and moved to the other end of the bar where he polished off an imaginary spot.

He ceased polishing and glanced up as a smartly dressed woman who seemed about thirty and was probably a little older came in through the side door. The customer at the bar didn't have to look up. He caught a glimpse of her in the mirror and then edged around a little so that his back was toward her.

She walked over to the middle of the long counter and said to the painted lady with the pink pelvis, "Pardon me, dear, but could you tell me if there is anyone around here who would be apt to know how to make a Tom Collins?"

"Nobody but me, I guess," Joe spoke up amiably.

"That'll be just fine." She put a cigarette in her pretty mouth (made up to look thin and hard) and said, "Gimme a match, Steve."

The male customer turned, scowling a little. "I'm disguised as Mortimer, and who are you to call me Steve?"

"I'm Paulette of the Follies."

He gave her a critical look, from the top of a doll-size hat to the dusty heel of a black patent-leather pump. She obligingly lifted her skirt so that it just cleared the top of her left stocking for a flash of bronze-tanned thigh. "Nice hose," he said noncommittally. "Take a gander at mine." His sock, when he pulled up his pants leg, was wrinkled—no garters.

Paulette shuddered. "Slimy! I'll quit if you will."

"Good," declared Steve cheerfully. He told Joe, "I'll pay for the lady's drink."

"Been waiting for me long?" Paulette adjusted her hat a little more cockeyed in the bar mirror, which had waves in it anyway.

"I wasn't waiting for you at all. I didn't even expect

that any other sheet on the Coast would send a writer of any kind to cover one of Phoebe Dover's divorces and weddings, especially not you, the world's most beautiful by-liner. Did you get the stockings on your expense account?"

"That's between me and the cashier."

"And he's probably skipped to Canada by now. Did you really come to see Phoebe take the vows?"

"Not entirely in an official capacity, although I'll shoot in a story on it. Actually I'm to be best woman—hadn't you heard?"

Steve shook his head. "But now that I come to think of it, weren't you maid of honor at her last wedding?"

"That's right."

"Apparently Phoebe doesn't think it was your fault that the marriage didn't last."

"I'm not sure Phoebe wants her marriages to last. She isn't really an imaginative writer, you know. She can only get one good novel out of her experience with each husband, then she has to move on. Actually I've been maid of honor at all of Phoebe's weddings."

"Oh, then you knew her first husband, Nels Gunnarson, the Swedish poetry-and-pistol expert."

"I introduced him to her." Paulette paused reflectively. "He was my fiancé up to that time."

"Sorry I was flippant about it. Excuse please. I didn't know."

"It was before your time," Paulette assured him dryly. "I'm older than I look—I hope."

"You must have hated Gunnarson—and Phoebe."

"Not Nels. I did hate Phoebe for a while. A woman never condemns the man who forgets his promises—at least not much. She always blames the woman who lures him away. In my case I realized when I had time to think it over that Phoebe, being the kind of an egomaniac that she is, didn't think I mattered. Everybody

who ever lands inside of Phoebe's sphere of influence lets her ride roughshod over his or her own personal desires. She's got a way with her, and back of that there's an armory full of what it takes. Now having spilled my life story to you, my friend, would I seem inquisitive if I asked if the Sunkist Los Angeles *Bulletin* has sent its principal male word mauler to this God-forgotten cow town merely to cover a lady novelist's fourth experiment in matrimony?"

Steve grinned. "My boss didn't tell me, at least not anything that yours didn't tell you."

"Oh, that's it? Shall we pool all our dope?"

"No. I know a few things that didn't come in over the A.P. wire."

"So do I."

"Just the same, no pool. Scoop me if you can."

"That should be easy."

Joe, who had been trying to follow the conversation and mix the drink at the same time, finally shoved the frosted glass in front of Paulette and allowed his painfully concentrated expression to fall apart into a wise leer.

"I get it now," he said. "You folks are newspaper reporters. That accounts for everything."

"Then I'll take a short beer."

Joe paid no attention to that. "I never knew there was a good-lookin' one before."

"A conquest," cheered Steve. "But, Joe, my bucko, you were on the wrong side of the bar for the best act on the bill."

"No," confessed Joe sheepishly. "There's a big mirror on the other side of the room."

Steve looked over there. Joe was right.

"You rascal! But in a way you are correct in your assumption that newspaper reporters are not ordinarily ornamental. Miss Paulette Dubois of the San Francisco

Sentinel is merely an exception which proves the rule. Even I, her rival, admit that she is the most eye-filling bit of fluff ever let loose by an unprincipled newspaper editor to prey upon the hearts and souls of men. Bless her little black heart, she seems as innocent as a five-year-old on her way to spend her Sunday-school pennies for lollipops. But don't let her sweet expression and that immature-looking torso deceive you. Actually Miss Dubois is a grim, gray ghoul, the vampire ghost of a prowling panther, a voluptuous vulture, a howling hyena, hoarse with gloating laughter."

"Thanks, Steve, you're so sweet and understanding. Joseph, this damn straw is busted. Gimme another and —er—have one yourself."

The tail end of the rodeo parade must have passed. The comparative silence of a boiler factory settled down outside, and a small crowd of men shouldered in through the swinging front doors. Approximately half of them were in costumes of the old West, including beards, obviously grown fresh for the occasion. According to a rodeo advertisement tacked up behind the bar, there was to be a prize for the best crop of personal alfalfa. The other men were either plumb strangers of the tourist variety or citizens of the town who took the fiesta idea not too seriously and compromised with the spirit of the old West merely by wearing their best Stetsons. Strangely enough they seemed to fit in with the traditions of the locality better than the booted and spurred youngsters with whiskers. It takes more than chaps and a gay bandanna to make an old-timer, and these sober citizens in their everyday clothes had their pasts graven on them in the saddle-warped legs and the rolling, teetering walk of men who have lived most of their lives astride a horse. Theirs were the weather-beaten cheeks and the far-seeing pale eyes of sailors and plainsmen. By comparison with the leather complexions

of these elders the lads in the fancy pants had only slight sunburns, and from their eyes was missing the look of eagles. Some of the masqueraders even wore thick-lensed, horn-rimmed spectacles, which is something Wild Bill Hickok or Buffalo Bill never would have thought of.

Paulette and Steve were at the end of the bar nearest the door. Without exception the men who entered gave them a wide berth and circled toward the rear.

"Apparently in Outlaw," whispered Paulette, "women do not normally do their drinking standing up."

Some of the younger members of the crowd made audible comments which skirted on the personal. They were a little noisy, considering the fact that it was still early.

"Long time, Joe," said one of the whiskered clan, "since you had anybody in here better lookin' than Susie up there in the gold frame."

"Hush, Red."

"Why? If I want to criticize art is there any reason for stoppin' me?" Red appealed to the others. "Did I say anything any beautiful young woman could take offense at?" He spoke earnestly to the nude in the painting. "Did I hurt your feelings, Susie, old girl? I'll bet you if they took their clothes off hardly any of 'em would be any handsomer than you are, Susie, my love."

His friends gathered around Red in a compact little group. His voice seemed to be muffled somewhat.

The bartender did what he could to help. He leaned affably on both hands from the other side of the bar. "What'll it be, gents?"

Red was the first one to answer. He struggled free from the good-natured clutches of his companions. "I'll have one of them lemonades like the lady's got," he declared.

"Pipe down! Shut up! Shush!" Admonitions from the crowd.

Red disregarded them. "Joe, bring my lemonade over alongside of hers."

Red had started to move down the line toward the two newspaper reporters.

"S-s-s-stop!"

And Red did stop. It was probably the hissing preliminary which did it. In the sage country men think twice before coming close to anything that sounds like a snake.

"Who said that?" Red was half truculent. The other half was scared almost sober.

"Why, *I* did," replied Steve pleasantly. "I thought it was only fair to warn you before you got hurt."

Red had to say something. This was still a country where a man couldn't let fighting words simply lie on the sawdust floor of a saloon. The frontier might be gone, but ghosts of tradition still lingered.

The answer was virtually formula. The words came from Red's lips almost without his having thought them up: "I'm not stoppin' anything for you or—"

"Prob'ly better," advised one of the older citizens. He had a long-tailed coat. His voice was gentle, just as Steve's had been. "You ain't been around here long enough, Red, to recconize the way one of the Seeley clan stutters a little when he begins to get riled. It won't be any disgrace for you to go quiet-like out the back door and do your drinkin' down at the drugstore for a spell."

"That's a good idea, Judge," said one of the other men wearing ordinary pants. He hooked onto Red's arm, and with the judge on the opposite side he oozed the young man toward the door. "Lockup's full right now, and we can't have no more fightin' till court sits."

Protesting loudly (but not too loudly) as an evidence of his unbowed manhood, Red allowed himself to be forcibly ejected via the alley. Outside he stood a moment, apparently debating whether or not to return and

demand satisfaction. As no one was looking, he must have decided that he was satisfied already. Red moved on.

Inside the Lost Jackass thirst parlor the judge and the sheriff returned to their places at the bar. Without actually going through the motions of dusting off one hand with the other they managed to give that general impression. Meanwhile they elaborately did not look at Steve.

But he addressed them anyway.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said with formal courtesy. "My name is Stephen Boyd."

He extended his hand as the judge turned toward him.

The older man looked at him steadily. "I didn't used to make mistakes—gettin' old, I guess. But a man's got a right to call himself anything he likes, anyway." He took Steve's hand. "Sheriff Carver, this is Mr. Boyd."

Steve laughed pleasantly. "No matter what my name is I am not unmindful of the customs of the country. Joe," he addressed the admiring dispenser of refreshments, "see what everybody will have."

Paulette nudged Steve in the ribs. "Is this a meeting of the Union League Club, or am I in on this?"

"You're in if you'll lend me ten bucks until payday," he replied in an undertone. "This round of liquid merriment is going to leave me flatter than a Mexican bride's first tortilla. How about it?"

She nodded.

"You're in."

"Thanks, Mr. Seeley."

"You know my name's Boyd."

"I know it was Boyd when I met you. But that was only three or four years ago. Does it make any difference?"

"Yeah. I like Boyd."

"Then Boyd it is. I won't use your name in my story

anyway—not unless—"

"There won't be any 'unless.' "

"Good. I always prefer a quiet wedding myself, especially when I'm— Oh-oh. I guess it doesn't matter what I prefer."

Steve followed the direction of her gaze.

Chapter Two: "READIN' MAKES A MAN UNHAPPY."

ENTERING FROM THE STREET were two well-dressed young men with clothes neatly pressed, shoes shined, everything that a well-tipped Pullman porter can do. They were about the same size, five feet six or seven inches. One was a medium blond, the other Latin swarthy. Both were of slender, wiry build, although the lighter-complexioned one had broader, more aggressive shoulders.

They paused a moment at the door to look the room over. The blond recognized Paulette, not with any particular pleasure apparently, because he scowled.

She did not acknowledge any rebuff—perhaps she never did—but took a couple of steps toward him with outstretched hand. He couldn't do anything but meet her advance.

"How are you, Skippy?" she said heartily. "And what are you doing in this town? You've seen rodeos before."

"Sure, and I've seen Phoebe Dover married before but I like a good show, even when it's being played by a road company."

"Road company?" Paulette demanded indignantly. "Have you forgotten that I belong to the original New York cast? I want you to meet Mr. Stephen Boyd." She turned the indifferent Steve around to face the newcomers. "Steve, do you know Skippy McGinn?"

"Not personally," Steve admitted, "but I saw him fight Joe Greenbaum last spring."

"You didn't see much of a fight," growled Skippy.

"Skippy was all out o' condition," explained the other young man.

The fighter introduced him: "Soso Costello, my manager."

Soso nodded acknowledgment. "My boy was sufferin' from nearly everything, including marriage, when he stepped into the ring with Greenbaum."

Paulette ventured a sardonic question: "Has he fully recovered from—er—everything?"

"No. D'ye know what that Dover dame done to Skip? Besides wreckin' the best lightweight physique in the world by keepin' him up nights and makin' him loll around in bed mornings she done something worse—she made him *refined.*" Soso emphasized the word with infinite scorn. "You know a box fighter ain't got no business bein' refined."

"A double rye," said Skippy to the bartender.

"Not hard liquor!" protested the manager.

"Why not?" said Skippy, turning a cold, distasteful eye on his mentor. "I'm not in training."

"Brazil nuts!" said Soso, aiming a futile kick at a brass cuspidor. He turned to Steve for sympathetic male understanding. "After his wife left him I was gettin' Skip back into pretty fair shape again, and then the newspapers print this stuff about her goin' to get married again, and he falls apart like a model-T go-buggy."

Skippy drank his rye. "That wasn't it," he explained. "It was the book she wrote about me. I haven't been able to sleep nights since it came out. That was when I started divorce proceedings."

Paulette started to laugh and then checked it. "Skippy, my lad, you certainly wrecked Phoebe worse than she wrecked you when you beat her to the divorce court. She usually gets the divorces in her family herself. That was the worst blow her pride ever got. How did you come to think of it?"

"He didn't think of it," declared Soso. "I thought of it—me and his doctor. The doc said she was an umpire—"

"A vampire?" suggested Paulette.

"Mebbe. Anyway, he said get Skip away or he'd be an old man in six months, so that's what I done. He'd be all right by now if it wasn't she's goin' to marry somebody else right the same day the divorce is final. It's lit his torch all over again."

"Quit talking about it, will you?" Skippy commanded. "Besides, it isn't the wedding that's got me down, I tell you; it's the book."

"I wouldn't think anything about that," Paulette suggested. "People are always recognizing themselves as characters in writers' stories."

"But in *Ringside Wife* she tells the world everything—even remarks I made to her in strict confidence in the privacy of the bath."

"I must read *Ringside Wife* again." Paulette had to smile at his earnest indignation. "Maybe I overlooked something."

By that time Skippy had accumulated another double rye. Under the influence of both of them and whatever he had had before he was getting very sorry for himself indeed.

"Don't read the damn book," he advised. "It leaves out what happened at the very end." Skippy turned away from Paulette, and his eyes met those of Steve. He saw or thought he saw in the other man's gaze a spark of sympathetic understanding. To Steve he said, "What the hell does a man do when another man admits he has been his wife's boy friend while he was away? What does he do, I'm asking you? I beat hell out of him but I couldn't kill him. He turned out to be only a kid and he didn't even put up his guard." Skippy, with his bare fist, punched the hard wooden front of the bar until the glassware all along its length rattled. "All I had to

do was that, but I couldn't. It would've killed him. He said he was sorry. Jesus! Can you imagine? He was sorry! The funny thing was I knew he was telling the truth. He probably never meant to get in so deep. She just led him along like she does everybody, just for the experience. She put it all in the book, except the last part about his telling me what he did and my beating him up. My wife did that to me—wrote it all out. I've read it over a hundred times."

"Just like I always said," Soso contributed sadly, "a boy who can use the back of his knuckles like Skippy shouldn't never learn even his ABCs. Readin' only makes him unhappy and interferes with his footwork. But if you want to know what I think, I think you beat up the wrong party."

"That's one of the things I've been thinking about. I can tell better after I've looked at her once more."

"Back away from the bar!" commanded a voice at the door. "That means everybody who ain't named Seeley."

Chapter Three: SIX-GUN LIGHTNING

THE LANGUAGE WAS AUTHENTIC OLD WEST, but the tall man who uttered it was "prosperous corn-belt farmer" as far as appearance went—except, of course, for the long-barreled revolver in his hand. His bulging muscles were covered with tailored clothing of excellent quality and fit, and his gaily plaid wool necktie probably came from London. His complexion did not, however, go well with tweeds. It was dark with a blue-black close-shaven chin. His mouth drooped a little on the right and seemed to be a trifle wider on that side, an optical illusion probably. Bleak blue eyes under tangled black bushy eyebrows gave him an intent fierce expression. Some way he reminded Stephen Boyd, who had never seen him before,

of the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk," that ferocious gentleman who inspired our childish terrors by grinding up the bones of Englishmen to make his bread.

While he was speculating on the newcomer's likeness to a bad dream, Steve stood still at the bar, a small glass of beer in his right hand. Apparently he did not for the moment notice that he was alone. All the other customers had backed away as ordered, and Joe was lying flat on his stomach on the duckboards behind the bar, a damp, uncomfortable lounging-place, but moderately safe.

"All right, Seeley," said the blue-jowled giant. "Get out of here and get out of town!" He was walking slowly and menacingly toward the bar.

Steve laughed shortly. "I should have told you that my name isn't Seeley, and the only reason I didn't move away from the bar with the others when you came in is that I was studying that ugly mug of yours and wondering if even an undertaker could make it look like anything."

"Steve!" It was almost an involuntary cry from Paulette. "Don't get him mad. That's Hank Dover, Phoebe's brother."

"Hello, Paulette," said Hank without looking at her. He didn't raise his voice either. "It's too late to warn this windy, night-crawling son of a sheepstealer. I'm mad already. Your friend has spewed out a mess of language on the floor that he's got to eat along with the sawdust and tobacco juice that's mixed in with it."

Somebody laughed, one of the younger, highly decorated drugstore *vaqueros*. It was certainly not the judge or Sheriff Carver. Those two gentlemen exchanged uneasy glances.

The sheriff spoke. "Look here, Hank, you gotta—"

"Shut up, John. This is something you can't do anything about. Red Hennessey told me this toad-faced snake was slingin' his lip around over here and that you

and Judge Pratt recognized him for a Seeley. So I've come to cut him down before he gets his growth." He spoke to Steve in much the same conversational tone as that in which the discussion with the sheriff had been carried on—the gentle suavity of diplomacy which is the preliminary to battle. "Seeley, or whatever your alias is, you'd better get down on your knees."

There was no movement of any kind on the part of Steve, so Hank repeated his command: "Get down on your knees!"

"You're not really serious?" Steve asked.

"I said, 'Get down on your knees!' "

"I just wanted you to repeat for the record. Sheriff, you and Judge Pratt heard what Mr. Dover said. I'm a stranger here, and all this might be just an act you fellows have worked up for your rodeo. Of course if—"

"This isn't an act," Hank interrupted.

"Look out, Steve!"

The gun which Henry Dover was using as a pointer suddenly flew out of his grip. Simultaneously there was the crack of a pistol shot followed by the tinkle of breaking glass.

Everyone, including the representative of the Dover clan, looked at the six-gun in Steve's hand and wondered how it got there and how he had contrived to fire it before the beer glass, which had previously been in his hand, had traversed the short distance to the floor.

"It does take a lot of practice," Steve made answer to the unspoken questions. "Will somebody please pick up the gentleman's hardware," he continued pleasantly, "and give it back to him? I'm afraid I've damaged the weapon a little but I don't think I hit his fingers, although I suppose they may tingle a little for a while."

Henry Dover's mouth began to move with half-formed curses.

"Not now, Hank," said Steve. "It would be too much

an anticlimax for you to threaten me with what you are going to do the next time you catch me off guard. I've sat through all the best melodramas and listened to all those ominous speeches and, besides, I'm never off guard."

Steve returned his own gun to a holster under his arm. "If we decide later to be friends, Hank, I'll teach you a little modern stuff about speed on the draw. My way beats shooting from the hip by at least half a split second. I learned it from a chap who is now living at Alcatraz. Good-by, Hank, until you are ready for your first lesson. And while we're waiting for that happy day don't forget that I hold the International Pistol Trophy for speed and accuracy."

The last words of Steve's speech were probably not heard by Henry Dover who, by the time they were uttered, was on the other side of the swinging doors.

The crowd, moving back toward the bar, laughed nervously, all but Paulette Dubois. She let her amusement peal forth long and loud.

"Steve," she said, "there isn't any International Pistol-Shooting Trophy."

"Isn't there?" Steve asked innocently. "I didn't know that." He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Oh, well, Hank doesn't know it either." He turned and spoke apologetically to the sheriff: "I'm sorry I had to do a thing like that in territory under your jurisdiction, so to speak. And I suppose you would like to see my permit to carry firearms. Here it is."

The sheriff took the piece of paper which Steve carried in his worn leather wallet. Even before he examined it closely he said, "I don't want to make it tough for you, son, but this ain't valid in this county unless I signed it myself, and I don't recollect ever havin' seen it before."

"It's valid, all right," Steve assured him, "even if you didn't sign it."

The sheriff looked at it carefully. "Well, damned if it ain't. This is federal." He looked up. "You an F.B.I. man?"

"No, but Mr. Hoover arranged to get that for me because of some work I did for him once—it doesn't matter what. Actually I'm nothing but a reporter on the Los Angeles *Bulletin,* and ordinarily I don't need a gun any more than a jackass needs longer ears."

Sheriff Carver studied the permit. He had never seen one like it before. "According to this, your name really is Boyd, just like you said."

Steve grinned at him. "For all practical purposes, yes. But actually you two gentlemen weren't entirely wrong in your first guess. My mother was named Seeley."

"Agatha Seeley?" asked Judge Pratt.

"Yes, sir. I once found a picture of you among her things," Steve told the judge. "But you've changed some. I didn't recognize you at first."

Judge Pratt managed a laugh that crammed the wistfulness of the past back into his heart. "I'll bet I've changed. I was a hell-roarin' squirt in those days."

"I remember Agathy too," contributed Sheriff John Carver. "I always thought she went away instead of marryin' you, Judge, because she didn't want to stay around here after her brother Rance got hisself shot by—"

"Hush!" cautioned the judge. "No use rubbin' salt in a wound."

The sheriff nodded his head with belated wisdom. "Prob'ly you're right. Let's liquor up instead. What'll you all have?"

"Rye!" said Skippy McGinn.

"Lay off, can't you?" wailed Soso. He appealed to Paulette. "If he keeps on drinkin' he's liable to go Berkshire and mebbe kill somebody."

Paulette laughed. "I have no influence over him or

any man unless I can get him some place where there is music and perfume and lighting effects which are kind to my gray hair and wrinkles."

A man with a small cowbell in his hand stuck his head in through the swinging front doors. He rang the bell and shouted, "Dinner now being served, gents, at the Commercial House."

As soon as he had vanished, the side door opened and a Chinaman in white shirt and white overalls also stuck his head in. "Allee same dinner by Sam Lo's Café—mebbe better."

When he, too, had vanished, Steve looked inquiringly at the judge.

"The Chink is right," Judge Pratt informed him. "The dinner at his place is 'mebbe better.' You're eatin' with me."

Chapter Four: A MAN OF PARTS

THE MAIN STREET OF OUTLAW was not so very wild Western. The town had tried, but there were too many gasoline filling-stations with high-test ladies' rest rooms, too many advertisements for soft drinks on twenty-four-sheet billboards, too many trucks and busses, and too few horses to make the illusion anything but fleeting. Somehow you couldn't feel that a pony-express rider would come thundering down the highway after you had looked in through the plate-glass window of the local plumbing emporium at a complete outfit of gleaming white enameled bathroom fixtures all set up, apparently ready to use.

There was a huge, gaudy banner across the road which said: *Outlaw Roundup, Sept. 6, 7, and 8,* and half the people you saw were in too-new old-time wearing-apparel, but the street was paved with concrete. There isn't much you can do in the way of imagining a six-

horse stagecoach on a concrete highway.

The town had been named Outlaw in the spirit of those Arizona days which had hung on another city of the territory the handle Tombstone. In neither case had the original settlers dreamed that they were founding anything but a temporary camp. But by freak of travel or unexpected mineral or cattle development the locations had been permanent.

The citizens of Outlaw were alternately ashamed and proud of the name of their tiny but thriving metropolis. There had once been an effort to change it legally by act of legislature, but that had been defeated, mostly by laughter.

Back in the 'eighties, when banditry really was a factor in the existence of Western communities, especially those strung along the transcontinental railway lines, there had been a powerful committee of vigilantes who had cleaned up the county to such an extent that the town could boast that "There isn't an outlaw in Outlaw." After a while people ceased to be quite so sensitive about proclaiming their virtues in a naughtier world, and the more progressive merchants, catering to tourist trade, realized that the picturesque appellation was a definite asset instead of a liability. They even shot several bullet holes in the walls and ceilings of their places of business and made up a few tall tales about how the holes got there during lead-slinging fights in bygone days. It worked. Tenderfoot tourists who came in to gape usually stayed to buy a little something in the way of a souvenir of the "real West."

As a matter of actual fact, the "real West" isn't quite so dead as people think—people, that is, who base their opinions on having passed through the principal cities along the cross-country trails.

Like certain "unreconstructed" sections of the South, there are large areas operating on Mountain Time which

stick pretty stubbornly to customs and codes of the high-handed, gay, and lawless hombres who first crowded the Indians and the buffalo off of the ranges to make room for cattle and later, to their own bitter chagrin, for sheep.

The country around Outlaw was, and is, pretty much an example of that sort of arrested development. When anybody gets shot permanently nowadays it is murder or homicide, just the same as it is in New York City or Chicago, and not "self-defense," as the coroner almost invariably pronounced it sixty years ago. By the same token nobody steals cattle to any extent any more, and the punchers, when they go to town on pay nights, usually change to "city pants" and, instead of forking their broncs, they ordinarily drive more perilous and fractious automobiles that sometimes wrap themselves around telephone poles on the way home. But the ancient hatreds and rivalries still smolder, more dangerously perhaps than in the days when surplus steam pressure was relieved by little white puffs of powder smoke.

Steve Boyd, as he walked from Sam Lo's Café to the place where he had parked his coupé, did not make the mistake of thinking that the annual home-talent rodeo in the arena on the outskirts of town was merely an expression of friendly rivalry between members of neighboring ranches. He knew what no tourist even suspected: that many a bulldogging contest would not come out satisfactorily to some of the spectators unless the steer unexpectedly won, and that a broncobuster of the Dover outfit who broke his own neck would bring a lot of pleasure to the black, boyish hearts of the personnel of the Seeley ranch, the Boxed-S, which belonged to his own family.

The Outlaw roundup and rodeo was, in fact, an institution similar to the final football game of the season

between two college teams, neither of whom has yet lost a contest and who hate each other bitterly because of a fight over a decision the year before.

Steve's understanding of the local angle was partly the result of his conversation with Judge Pratt during their dinner together at Sam Lo's Café. But besides that he knew the legend of the Seeley-Dover feud from the reminiscences of his mother's childhood. She had never intended to inculcate any partisanship in her boy, and his father, who had been something of a humorist in his day, had made sly fun of the hillbilly feud from which he had prosaically rescued his wife, but Steve, nevertheless, had a feeling that he was just as definitely a member of the Seeley family's battle troop as if he had been born on the Boxed-S ranch which he had actually never seen. He could laugh at the absurdity of grown men playing "Wild West," but he knew in his heart that if it came to a showdown he would probably be right in the center of the scrimmage himself.

Up to then Steve had never had occasion to sit in on the family troubles. For a moderately young man he had had a singularly colorful existence. At the time of his father's death there hadn't been enough money in the Boyd family exchequer for Steve to finish college. He became a stunt man in motion pictures. He took any and all kinds of hair-raising chances in circus and Western pictures, and because he was instinctively a good horseman he became an ace rider. Then he managed to get a start as a reporter on the San Francisco *Sentinel.*

He met Paulette Dubois. They might have had a love affair—Steve had thought Paulette was willing—if Steve hadn't been assigned to some special work for the press and authorities dealing with gangsterism. After that, and partly because he was a marked man to the underworld, Steve had been sent to cover the war. Partly because of non-journalistic activities which might be rewarded with

a firing squad, Steve had been recalled to America. He hunted up Michael O'Connel, the best managing editor he knew, whom he found behind a desk in Los Angeles. Mike didn't have anything open that was quite in Steve's line, but he put him on the pay roll anyway. "Take a shot at general assignments until something turns up," Mike suggested. Steve took the special job of covering Phoebe Dover's wedding in Outlaw, Arizona.

Steve had not really expected to get into any trouble or even to be recognized as a member of one of the mutually unfriendly factions in Outlaw and its environs. Actually he did not care in the least who in years gone by had put a questioned brand on range-born mavericks or later had illegally seized disputed water rights. He was not even moved particularly by the fact that not so very long ago—in his own boyhood, anyhow—a member of the Dover household had, in an unfriendly moment, shot and killed his uncle, Rance Seeley. From what Steve knew of the story, his uncle Rance was considerable of a rascal to begin with, and his call on Phoebe Dover had been entirely unexpected by everybody, except perhaps by Phoebe herself, and was definitely of a clandestine, even if romantic, nature. Probably almost any husband would have shot at him, even if only from irritation.

Besides, Nels Gunnarson, the husband in question, had been adjudged insane and committed to the asylum at Phoenix, where he was still confined. You can't, in all fairness, nurse a lifelong grudge against a man who isn't mentally responsible.

Steve had seen too much gun-fighting of a really sanguinary kind to take a cattle-country feud seriously, especially at first. Even the incident in the Lost Jackass saloon seemed almost entirely on the comedy side. He could shoot better and faster than any of the current crop of Dovers or Seeleys, either one; that was all. It was a matter of practice. They, in their generation, had not

had any occasion to draw firearms in earnest. Steve had been in spots where he *had* to be good—or else.

Steve scarcely thought that he had stirred up any really dangerous trouble for himself when he shot the revolver out of Henry Dover's fist. It had been a kind of childish grandstand trick, and he thought the other man would eventually calm down and let it go at that. Judge Pratt warned Steve not to expect so peaceful a solution, but Steve discounted all of the judge's conversation about fifty percent. He was, Steve thought, an elderly bit of local color who delighted in living against the background of a picturesque, historical period. That story now of his having been a sweetheart of Steve's mother and never marrying because she left town with another man—it sounded unlikely when you considered the judge's tobacco-stained whiskers and his apparent ability to stand up to a bar all day against a barrage of straight whisky and never have to lean on anything. Steve couldn't quite imagine the judge as having been a romantic element in the past of his dainty, aristocratic mother. That story must be embroidery on whole cloth or, at the very most, a colossal exaggeration of a childish and incidental acquaintanceship.

Chapter Five: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

STEVE WAS THINKING PLEASANTLY about that and other things associated with his first visit to the home country of his ancestors when his not easily astonished eyes encountered, coming down the almost deserted street, a small-sized individual in overalls, leading a ponderous, overfed steer. Steve had seen pictures of cattle that size in the rotogravure sections of the newspapers. They were blue-ribbon winners in national championships. It just happened that he had never seen one on the hoof. This was a magnificent specimen of animated beefsteak with

short horns and a sort of presidential microphone expression on its benevolent countenance.

Steve would have stopped to look as the beast passed by, even if the animal's chaperon had not addressed him.

"Hey, mister, have you seen Doc Blaufus anywhere around?"

"Why, no," Steve replied, transferring his startled attention to the speaker, who turned out to be a slightly husky mezzo-soprano. "I'm a stranger in Outlaw."

"Oh, excuse me," she said. "I thought you were someone I knew." She looked him over critically and searchingly. "You do seem familiar. Mebbe you're a visiting celebrity and I've just seen your picture in the papers somewhere."

"The odds are against it." She seemed like a nice tomboy sort of a kid, and Steve took a snapshot of her and her pal. "My picture has never been in the paper, but yours is very likely to be if I got a good one that time."

She looked up inquiringly. Her face at the level of her brown eyes was a little wider than most and tapered down to a small but determined chin. That made the outline heart-shaped.

Steve replied politely to her implied question, "Yes, I'm a reporter for a Los Angeles newspaper, and sometimes I sneak in a candid-camera shot of my own taking with one of my stories. It's not in my regular line, but my managing editor humors me in my whims. He likes pictures of nice kids."

"Oh." The girl seemed about to pass on. It was the steer who prolonged the interview. He stayed where he was. In fact, he began to settle down to his knees, as if he intended to take a nap right there in the middle of the street.

His custodian yanked on the nice white woven-cotton lead rope which was fastened around the beast's neck and kicked him in not very ladylike fashion just aft of

the brisket. "Pedro! Pedro!" she cried despairingly. "Don't go to sleep again." She looked across Pedro's neck at Steve. "Help me keep him on his feet."

Steve was obliging. The youngster had a frank directness of appeal that he liked. So Steve took a grip on the loose hide under the steer's neck and lifted, at the same time yelling "Yippee!" right square in the animal's velvet ear.

Pedro seemed to understand. He quit trying to kneel and instead took a few steps forward. But they were staggering, drunken steps, with very little co-ordination fore and aft, as if the motive power were two property men inside of a canvas-and-papier-mâché replica of a real animal intended for stage comedy.

"This critter is going to lie down," Steve said with judicial pessimism, "in spite of anything we can do. We'd better head him to one side of the road, out of the way of traffic, before it happens."

The girl nodded. Together they guided the stumbling steps of Pedro toward a small patch of dusty grass beside a highway speed-limit sign. Just in time too. Pedro seemed to sense that they were going to give him his own way, and with a tired sigh he sank to the ground, closed his eyes and began to snore immediately.

The girl dropped to her knees beside her very handsome pet. "I don't know what to do now."

"What," asked Steve practically, "did you intend to do in the first place?"

"He's entered in the fat-stock show over at the rodeo and fairgrounds. I've been keeping him in a barn right here in town for a few days so he wouldn't be nervous and wear off any of his weight. I was intending to walk him over to the grounds real slow, and we started right after lunch, but almost as soon as we got out of the barn he began to try to lie down. I never did see him act like this before. Do you think he's going to die?"

Privately that's exactly what Steve did think. There seemed no point, however, in destroying hope in the heart of this anxious youngster.

So he said, "No," as he lifted the lid of one of the steer's eyes and examined the iris critically, "but from what little I know of the diseases of bovine mammals, I believe he is suffering from a severe attack of—er—let me see—salpiglossis, I think is the name of it."

"That might be it," she admitted soberly, "although there are some indications of scabiosa, don't you think?"

Steve looked at her searchingly. There wasn't the ghost of a smile. He did see, however, that he would have to make a hasty revision of his ideas about her age. There was a general impression of roundness which cannot be definitely described but which blooms as delicately in the adolescent feminine figure as does velvet, dusty down on the outside of the ripening peach.

"You've studied botany?" he asked.

She nodded. "In my second year at Bennington. Of course I've forgotten most of it now. That was so long ago."

"You've forgotten because it was so long ago?" Steve repeated, vaguely dazed, not all pretense either. He still didn't think she was more than fourteen or fifteen. She couldn't be. He was being taken for a ride.

"I haven't had much use for my knowledge of flowers—not around the ranch," she said. "We once had a bull called Ferdinand, but when the book came out we had to change his name to Joe Louis to keep him from killing all the other bulls on the range."

"I see," Steve conceded politely, "that I made a number of mistakes about you. But let's go back to the middle of reel one, which is about where I came in. You wanted to get hold of a certain Doc Blaufus who, I assume, is a vet. Shall I hunt him up for you?"

"I'm afraid," she said, "that a stranger in town

wouldn't know where to look. If you don't mind staying with Pedro for a little while I think I can find Doc quicker than you can."

Steve agreed to watch beside the sleeping steer, and the regular custodian departed forthwith. After she was gone the Los Angeles reporter began to feel a little silly. Half a dozen passers-by stopped to ask him either what was the matter or to whom the animal belonged. He did not know the answer to either question. The matter of the ownership was solved eventually by one of the spectators who pointed out the O-X brand on the animal's flank.

"It belongs to the Dover outfit," he explained, "and most likely it's Hank Dover's entry in the stock show."

The name Hank Dover immediately struck a responsive chord in Steve's breast and made him wish, for the moment, that he had not so freely offered to guard the sleeping steer. If Hank should pass that way he might draw a wrong conclusion from the presence of a Seeley in charge of a piece of Dover property.

To the man who had identified the brand Steve explained, "It was a girl who asked me to watch while she went for the vet—a kid about sixteen years old."

"That was Joan Gunnarson, only she's nearer twenty. Had on jeans and a man's blue shirt, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Them kind of clothes is deceivin'. It was Joan all right."

Chapter Six: FIRST LOOK AT A MAN TRAP

"WHAT GOES ON HERE?" demanded a voice, a familiar feminine voice this time.

Steve looked up at the open car, very large, very luxurious, and a little ostentatiously Western. In it reclined Paulette Dubois, looking her beauty-parlor best

in a different frock from the one in which Steve had seen her before lunch. This was quite summery, a costume for conquest, not labor. The reason for her more elaborately feminine toilet was the woman who sat beside her and, in spite of all, eclipsed her. This other woman was just a little older than Paulette, but also that much more attractive in a fully matured, well-cared-for fashion. Steve could name her without waiting for the introduction which Paulette immediately vouchsafed.

"Phoebe Dover—the gentleman is Steve Boyd. I don't know the name of the cow."

"The steer is Pedro," said Phoebe, "and we have already met, although we care very little for one another. How do you do, Mr. Boyd?"

Her voice was low and pleasant. With it she spoke lightly. Beneath the lacquer of convention was depth. The same theme was carried out in Phoebe's eyes. They were large, alert, and luminous, backed by the black velvet depths of tragedy. Her wide mouth, a little sad but made up in gay scarlet, twitched at the corners as she translated Steve's reaction.

"You are," she said, "very like someone I once knew. I am glad, I think, that he is dead and that you are very young and I am very, very old."

Her hand was ice that hot September day. Steve held it as if under command of his long-dead uncle to make it warm again.

For Steve knew what he had not been told by Paulette Dubois or by anybody: that youth and love and tenderness had died for Phoebe Dover with the bullet which had entered Rance Seeley's heart. She had made a public jest of herself and of her marriages to other men, but none of them had meant anything. She had merely been walking through the jungle of time, shooting at live targets.

Such a woman is dangerous and always has been. In-

difference coupled with tremendous physical magnetism is a combination before which men may well flee. They never do.

Steve, standing there in the presence of the woman who, in her even lovelier youth, had been the beacon which lured his uncle to a rendezvous with death, felt, strangely enough, no animosity toward her. Instead he thought that he could understand perfectly why Rance Seeley had gone to find her that night fifteen years before, when a bullet had found him instead. Steve could quite comprehend why a man might have become unreasonably mad about her, why a man might even still do so.

She was speaking again, the slow smile of understanding lifting the corners of her mouth. "I want you to meet my father, John Dover."

There was indeed an old gentleman in the front seat beside the uniformed Chinese chauffeur; Steve hadn't noticed him. He had a white so-called military mustache, deeply sunken, suspicious blue eyes. His cheeks were sunken, too, and had a color which was a mixture of tan and jaundice yellow. He was not very well, if appearances were any indication.

Steve rather hesitatingly extended his hand to the old man while Phoebe Dover raised her voice: "Father, this is Mr. Boyd of Los Angeles."

While they were shaking hands the daughter said in an ordinary tone, "Father is deaf. Paulette has told me who you really are. But don't admit it very loudly in Father's presence. He carries his ideas of family honor to medieval extremes."

Steve turned to her. "You do not share his prejudice?"

"No. I never did. I think you, more than anyone else, know that—you and your uncle Rance. He was eighteen and I was sixteen when I married another man, my first husband. Fool that I was, I only did it to make Rance

jealous. Rance laughed at me—he had a poker face like yours—but his heart was broken too. I found that out when he came back to Arizona seven years later and—But never mind about that. I think you know anyway. I've said more than I would to any man who did not look at me through the very windows of his eyes. Perhaps we are only remembering together."

Paulette laughed. "Let Steve alone, my lamb. Can't you see my brand on him?"

"No."

"I was afraid it hadn't stuck. But as far as you're concerned, he's only here for the ride; he's a newspaper man covering your fourth wedding tomorrow."

"Is it that many?" Phoebe asked, as if in dismay.

"Sure, I've been keeping track. Besides, there's the public record—three husbands, three best-selling novels. You can't write a good story without a new man to take apart."

"That's a cruel diagnosis, Paul, even though there may be a grain of truth in it. However, I don't think it accounts for my wedding with George Woodstock tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening?" Steve repeated interrogatively. "Isn't it a lot of swank to have an evening wedding out here?"

Paulette was the one who replied with a laugh, "It isn't swank. Her divorce from Skippy McGinn isn't final until noon. Besides that, Phoebe has the last installment of a serial to deliver for December *Woman's Fireside Review,* and she can't finish it until about five or five-fifteen tomorrow afternoon."

Phoebe pursued her own thoughts, heedless of her friend's gibing interruption: "No one could say that poor George is interesting enough for a novel. He's just a very successful businessman."

"And," completed Paulette, "you've never been mar-

ried to a very successful businessman before. That's why you haven't written the wife-versus-secretary plot so far. I shall look for it next season."

"I wonder," mused Phoebe, "if I *could* write that story. If I remember rightly, the wife always gets the worst of it. I don't like that—in fact, I don't think I shall do it that way."

"But you'll have to," Paulette protested. "Who do you think buys your books anyway? Echo replies promptly, 'The working girls.' If you let the wife win you lose your principal audience. Isn't that so, Steve?"

Steve was not paying attention. What they were saying was woman's talk; he was not interested. Phoebe, in a pleated light blue silk frock that was tight across her breasts and loosely clinging over her legs and thighs, occupied his imagination. Phoebe dressed, not as American women do to reveal the maximum of uncovered feminine pulchritude, but rather in the continental manner which promises much, but only to the intimate. It was a little confusing to Steve to sort out his emotions. He did not know for sure whether he was checking up to find out what it was that his uncle Rance had seen in her that was worth dying for, or if he was merely viewing her as any man does any personable woman upon meeting her for the first time.

"What did you say, Paulette?" he asked absently.

"Whatever it was I'm not going to repeat it. But I warn you, Stevie, my lamb, don't let old Mr. Dover see you staring at his only daughter as if you were wondering which side of the bed she sleeps on. She's his idol, and although there is clay from three marriages on her feet he still dislikes every man who comes near her."

Steve glanced at the old man, and with a sudden jolt he realized that Paulette was right. Old John Dover was reading his pleasantly vagrant thoughts and hating him fanatically for having them.

"He's crippled with rheumatism," Phoebe said reassuringly, "but if he knew that you were the nephew of Rance Seeley—" She laughed uproariously and then sobered suddenly. "It's frightening the way the old forget almost everything but their hates, isn't it?"

"Do you still carry a notebook, Phoebe," Paulette asked maliciously, "in which to put down things like that?"

"Of course," Phoebe admitted simply and produced one from her purse. "What was it exactly that I said?"

Paulette looked at Steve and shrugged. "What did I tell you? If she wasn't so naïvely honest I could kill her myself. She crucifies friends, husbands, and relatives and then wonders why anyone gets hurt. To Phoebe the only things worth saying are those she can sell for two bits a word—or what is your rate now, darling?"

"A little more than that," the authoress admitted. "*Ringside Wife* made the top three best-seller lists this spring, besides having a very important serial circulation. I got a boost on the strength of it."

"That makes us newspaper by-liners feel like white chips in a millionaire's gambling-casino, doesn't it, Steve?"

"Not particularly."

"Applause!" Paulette clapped her hands mockingly. "You write for the love of it, I suppose, Mr. Boyd, not for money?"

Steve denied that. "I don't write very well or very much. I'm a leg man even when I'm working in Europe."

"Have you been in France recently?" Phoebe asked. He nodded. "Get in and go to the rodeo arena with us. I want to hear firsthand about people we probably both know."

"I can't. I promised a young woman in blue jeans that I'd watch this steer for her until she got back."

"Bother. Come anyway. The young woman is my daughter Joan. I'll explain it to her."

Steve shook his head. "You tempt me, but I think I'll have to do my own explaining this time."

"Stout, stout fella," declared Paulette. "A veritable heart of oak is thine. If you're staying at the Commercial House, I'll reward you with my society about dinner-time."

"I won't be there until midnight or later," Steve evaded.

"I see." Paulette was good-natured. "Midnight, you say? At that time of night I suppose I'll have to reward you some other way—or would that cause gossip?"

"I wish," said Phoebe almost wistfully, "that I could be as shamelessly naughty as you are, Paul. If I like a man I immediately begin to think of marrying him." To the chauffeur she said, "We'll go along now, Wah See. Good-by, Mr. Boyd. I will, of course, see you later, but not very much so, I hope."

The car drove away. Phoebe Dover was the one who looked back at Steve. He knew that he stood on the brink of a man trap, and yet he could not help but feel the irresistible attraction toward this sophisticated woman carefully trained in the tricks of fascinating loveliness.

Steve dismissed her, or tried to, with a laugh of derision directed at himself. She was a dozen years older than he; she was wealthy woman who, besides that, could earn more in a month than he could in a year and, finally, she was marrying another man the next day. Still he could not help wondering what he would do if Phoebe Dover turned loose her entire battery on him. So far she had done nothing but wing him lightly with a trial shot for "range and direction."

Chapter Seven: WELCOME TO THE FEUD

"How is Pedro?" Steve hadn't noticed the girl's approach. He had been looking off toward tomorrow,

disappearing in a cloud of dust.

It was a little hard to fit the young owner of the f steer into the picture as the daughter of Phoebe Dove There had to be a little adjustment of focus to inclu in one family the tragically gay woman of the wor who had just left and this sober-faced youngster in dus blue jeans and sombrero. He could see a slight reser blance, but it was almost entirely in the eyes, and mayb even that was imaginary.

She was alone.

"The steer hasn't moved," Steve said in answer to he question. "Couldn't you find the vet?"

"No. I left word for him everywhere. Thanks a lo for everything. There's nothing more to be done. I'l take over now."

It was obviously a dismissal, so Steve wished her luc and went on his way. He found his car, got it started and headed for the fairgrounds where the rodeo aren was located. The road took him past the prone Pedro and his mistress, and he had intended to hail.

As he approached, however, he noticed that two men were with her. One of them was probably the veterinary Dr. Blaufus. He looked like an animal doctor, cattle country type. Big enough to hold a bull down with one hand and give him a pill with the other, there was nevertheless, that gentleness of manner and unobtrusive precision of movement which characterizes a good physician for either man or beast. Besides those marks there was an identifying worn black satchel lying open on the ground.

The other man, however, was something different again. He was Hank Dover.

Steve canceled his intention to call out to Joan and ask her how her pet was getting along. Instead he drove by unnoticed. There was no point in getting the girl into trouble with her uncle by letting him know that she

had met up with an enemy of the family.

Hank and Joan seemed to be having a dispute of some sort. It was apparently about the steer, because they both pointed at him during the course of their remarks, which seemed to be slightly preheated. They wouldn't have been aware of Steve if he had been Gabriel going by in a golden chariot tooting a tuba. Steve wondered, though, what they could be arguing about.

He arrived at the exhibition grounds, headquarters for half the red dust in the county, most of it being kicked up around a high boarded enclosure which was doubtless the arena. A horse-drawn watering-tank was competing without much success against the pulverized maroon-colored granite which is a fifty-percent component of Arizona soil.

Steve preserved the enviable nonentity of a tenderfoot tourist as long as he remained in his covered automobile. But as soon as he parked his transportation in a space allotted to visiting vehicles he was recognized. The young man in charge of the lot, an undersized, grinning boy of fifteen dressed in chaps for the occasion, refused to take the dime which was the advertised parking charge.

"I couldn't, mister. I'm a Seeley myself." Then he raised his voice: "Hi there in the corral, Steve Seeley is here!"

"Wait a minute," Steve protested. "My name isn't Seeley."

"Neither is mine, but we're both Seeleys just the same. You're pretty near the most Seeley there is around here ever since you backed Hank Dover out of the Lost Jackass this morning."

The boy turned to the dozen or so cowboys who were coming toward them from the corral. "Hey you, punchers, look who drove up in a cloud o' dust just now!"

One of the men, too thin for his height, wore a good

deal too much costume. His fur chaps were so wide he looked as if he had stood them up somewhere and jumped into them. His shoulders failed to fill the gaucho shirt, but the sleeves were still too short, and there was a lot of bony wrist in sight.

He got to Steve first and shook hands. "I'm Scott Seeley, a cousin of yours, I guess. I edit the Outlaw *Weekly Post*. Glad to see you. Drop over at the office tomorrow sometime—if the Dovers don't separate you from your breath first."

He introduced the others. Some were Seeleys; others merely worked for the Boxed-S outfit.

"Our corral is at this end," Scott told Steve. "These boys are representing the family in the contests. The Dovers have their headquarters over on the other side."

"What kind of a rodeo is this?" demanded Steve. "Isn't there anybody in it but Dovers and Seeleys?"

"Well"—Scott scratched his head—"there's a few independent riders, mostly Injuns, but if one of them broke his neck we wouldn't count it."

It was getting on toward show time, and when Steve suggested that he had better be going in to get a seat he was met by a storm of opposition, especially from his younger relatives. It seemed that they had expected that he would automatically enter the rodeo contests as a representative of the Boxed-S outfit.

"The way things stand now we haven't really got a Chinaman's chance," explained one of them who had been introduced as Sears Seeley. He was a handsome lout, with a perpetually discontented expression, who looked like a model for still life but was something else entirely on horseback. Steve learned later that Sears was not his real name but one that he had acquired because he always had enough troubles on hand to fill a mail-order catalogue. His list included too many girls, too many relatives, too many engagements, too much to do,

and too large a cavity for the amount of food he was able to get to eat, no matter how much that was. The inadequacy of life accounted for his pessimism.

Just now Sears looked at Steve with anticipatory discouragement. "I don't suppose you care whether the Seeleys get beat or not."

"What can I do about it?" Steve demanded, rolling a cigarette one-handed and lighting it on his thumbnail. "I'm no cow hand."

"Then where'd you learn to roll a cigarette that-a-way?"

"That? I practiced it once when I was waiting."

"Waitin' for a chuck wagon to show up at a roundup, mebbe?"

"No. To tell the truth, boys, I just haven't any accomplishments that would be any good in a rodeo. I'm a newspaper reporter."

"You can shoot," Sears pointed out.

"Not in public competition I can't. Listen, gang, I'm no show-off. I did that trick with what's-his-name—Henry Dover—simply in self-defense. Nobody was any more surprised than I was when I found I'd fired first."

"So that's how it was?" Scott Seeley inquired without a trace of the grin he was entitled to. "I wondered."

Chapter Eight: RODEO GALAHAD

RELUCTANTLY THEY LET STEVE GO. Unaccountably he rather hated to leave them himself. They seemed, most of them, like members of a college football team. All but two or three were young, a little too young for the danger they were about to encounter.

He realized that even more when he had taken his seat in the bleachers and had a good look at the Dover outfit as they rode in for the grand entry, circus-fashion. The Dovers were easily identifiable as they made a group

of their own at the head of the equestrian procession. They were bigger, older men, more experienced, better riders even.

Among them was Henry Dover, now wearing leather chaps, dark blue shirt, and red bandanna neckerchief. He was more natural so. The mystery of the droop on the left side of his mouth seemed accounted for when he absently took a plug of eating-tobacco from his pocket and bit off a chew. The arm motion when he did that was like that which a man might make if he were yanking out one of his own back teeth.

Hank seemed undamaged by his accident of the morning. If his hand was injured in any way it was impossible for the casual observer to tell, because he wore gauntleted gloves most of the time.

He also appeared to be in no wise humbled by his experience earlier in the day. At the head of his men he rode as carelessly assured as a general or a dictator.

Beside him was Albany, the man whom Joe, the bartender, had designated as the foreman of the Ring-Bar-X and the alleged world-champion roper. Both men were beautifully mounted as, in fact, were all the Dover contingent.

This was noticeable by comparison with the wiry mustangs which, with a few exceptions, were between the ground and the variously assorted Seeleys. But Steve had inherited some knowledge of horses from his ancestors and had acquired a little more when he had risked his neck daily, trying to keep up with the cowboy stunt men in the movies; so he knew that the Seeley mounts were probably better all around cow ponies than the showier thoroughbreds of their rivals. A half-wild Western bronc is as deceptive as a flat-faced Chinese bandit in a white silk nightgown. You can get no idea of how much hell is compressed in his wicked heart unless you notice the furtive gleam in his lazy-looking eyes and are a pretty

fair mind reader besides. So Steve was not particularly sorry for his kin. The Dover horses doubtless cost more, but they might not be quite so shifty on their feet.

During the preliminary exercises in the arena Steve spotted Phoebe and Paulette, who were sitting in a sort of a ringside box—anyway, a space railed off from the rest of the stand. Phoebe, he noted, did not seem interested. He wondered why she had bothered to come. She must have seen rodeos before. And time was crowding her a little, what with a wedding the next day and a story to finish before then. Perhaps weddings and stories were old hat to Phoebe. Steve fancied that she looked forward to them as listlessly as she did to the hair-raising deeds that were about to be performed in the damp and dusty sawdust just below her royal box.

While he was looking at her Phoebe turned and caught his eye. Her own lighted with pleasure as she patted the empty chair alongside her own and indicated with a gesture that he was to sit in it.

Steve had to accept the invitation. If it were not for the fact that he was already uncomfortably conspicuous because of the spreading gossip about his show-off play earlier in the day, he would not have minded so much going to take a seat in the very front of the stand alongside of the most celebrated citizen of the county, the famous novelist, Phoebe Dover. As a personal experience, he thought he would like to become better acquainted with this exotic literary bloom from a country where only rugged sagebrush normally flourished. But Steve was, since that morning, a public character himself and as such had forfeited the right to private personal experience.

As he stumbled over his fellow spectators on his way to the aisle it occurred to Steve that for him to sit in the limelight, together with the most publicized member of the Dover family, might lay him open to unfounded

suspicion in the eyes of the Seeleys.

Of course it all seemed pretty silly to Steve, but he knew that children's toy steam engines occasionally blow up just as dangerously as real ones and that the gunpowder in Fourth of July fireworks can sometimes be just as deadly as it is in a rifle. He was thoroughly aware that he was letting himself in for something as he stepped over the rail of the Dover box.

Hank Dover, in the ring, noticed what had happened immediately, and a dark scowl crossed his features. He said something to his foreman, and that anomalous Eastern cowboy glanced up. Strangely enough he seemed more upset than Hank. His expression changed to one of blind fury. Steve wondered why. Albany wasn't a Dover except by occupational loyalty. What did he really care?

The Seeleys did not run quite true to Steve's expectations. Scott Seeley, the cowboy editor, caught sight of him first and grinned in sudden appreciation. Apparently he thought it was a joke on the Dovers.

"Atta boy," he shouted, waving his sombrero. *"Te morituri salutamus!"*

Paulette leaned across Phoebe to speak to Steve. "Is my hearing defective, or did that cowboy address you in Latin?"

"It was Latin. He's an old pal of mine from the last days of Augustus."

"Roman, huh?"

"Usually. But you know how restless these tramp cow hands are."

"Have a heart," pleaded Phoebe.

"Look at this next lad," Paulette went on, indicating Sears Seeley who was passing stolidly without even glancing at Steve. "He's the kind of a man who puts on one good durable expression when he gets into his vest and pants in the morning and wears the entire outfit

all day without getting a wrinkle in any part of it."

"Looks to me as if he were discouraged about something," Phoebe contributed, "life, maybe."

"A cow with an expression like that," her friend amplified, "would probably give vinegar."

The exhibition in the arena began with a fancy-riding contest.

It was not very interesting except that there were some healthy-looking youngsters in it. The girls and boys had the same quality in their faces and they dressed pretty much alike. One of the girls could ride all around any of the others. After a while Steve recognized her as his friend of the noontime adventure with the sleeping steer. She was dressed a little fancier now in beaded leather bolero and fringed leggings, but she still looked immature and, Steve decided finally, guileless.

"Yes, that's my daughter Joan," Phoebe admitted. "I was a tomboy like that myself at her age, but not quite so serious about it. Look at Father watching her. He almost thinks he is seeing again the virginal little maid that he worshiped so long ago."

"You mean you?" asked Paulette.

"I mean me," Phoebe answered.

John Dover was indeed following the graceful movements of his grandchild with eyes that certainly were missing nothing. His hearing might not be so good as it once had been, but he could see far and through.

"Hello. May I sit in your box?"

Phoebe kept her eyes on the arena. "Yes, Skippy. If you can stand it, I can."

"After all, I'm still your husband until tomorrow afternoon," the prize fighter said with tentative belligerence.

"Yes, you're my interlocutory husband, I suppose," agreed Phoebe. "I don't know exactly what privileges that entitles you to."

Skippy laughed bitterly. "I can't recall that I ever ha any privileges."

"Aw now, Skip, don't get yourself all sad," pleade Soso from the rear of the box. "It ain't good for you glands or something; that's what the doctor said."

"Oh, hello, Soso." Phoebe did not turn to greet he husband's manager. "I wondered if you weren't aroun somewhere."

"Sure," he agreed with surly acknowledgment of he greeting, "I'm usually around somewhere."

"I know," said Phoebe sweetly. "That's what madd our married life so charmingly intimate, knowing tha you would turn up in the most unexpected places. I always made Skippy look under the bed before he pu out the light."

"A manager's got to watch out to see that his boy don't break trainin'," Soso argued.

"I wonder," said Phoebe speculatively, "if I could have won you over to my side, Soso; that is, of course, if I had thought it worth while to try."

"No. I was wise to you all the time."

"Wisdom never yet saved a man from a woman."

"Quick, Phoebe, the notebook!" Paulette exclaimed.

"I've already used that one," the authoress told her.

"Where's the new husband?" asked Skippy. "That's one of the reasons I came over—to meet him."

"And give him some advice?" mocked Phoebe.

"No. Before you marry a man it's too soon to give him any advice."

"And afterward it's too late—is that it?" Phoebe finished the idea for him.

"If there's any advice being passed out you'll be the one who needs it the most," Skippy told her surprisingly.

"About what?"

"About clothes."

"But my dear, departing husband, Irene, of Bullock's-

Wilshire, and Valentina, of New York, see to my clothes."

"Not the ones I mean. I'm talking about what you wear around the bedroom."

"But I don't usually wear any, at least not while I'm doing my exercises."

"That's what I mean," Skippy told her with a trace of ancient rancor. "You stand around for half an hour like a lovely statue of Venus, and then you put a cold-cream mask over your face, greased gloves on your hands, flannelette pajamas and bed socks to come to bed."

Joan, Steve's friend of the noon hour and daughter of the exotic woman seated next to him, was giving an exhibition of trick riding. She was astride a very well-trained pony which was evidently her own. They, she and the docile pony, did a number of intricate feats very well. After the applause had died down someone in the spectators' seats commented contemptuously on the fact that in his opinion the horse had done all the work and that anybody who could sit in a saddle could put him through all his tricks.

That crack nettled Hank Dover, who was acting as a sort of mounted master of ceremonies.

With the delightfully informal animosity which prevailed in general, Hank yanked off a corner of plug tobacco and said, "Any putty-spined relative of a skulk-in' skunk of a Seeley will have to take back remarks like that under my personal supervision, and you needn't think I don't know who it was, Matt Horrisberger. Just to prove that the little lady is the best horse-woman in Outlaw County, she will ride any animile you pick out."

"Yeah?" and other cries of derision from the sun-drenched seats. Finally one voice suggested, "How about that stallion you're forkin' yourself?"

That annoyed Hank a little. His horse was the fine animal in the county, but he was a nervous, vicio beast. He might not have been that way normally, b Hank, who was very large and very strong, nagged hi into displays of temper, probably just in order t demonstrate his own savage mastery.

Hank didn't think Joan could ride his stallion.

Joan thought she could. At least, in the face of enem ridicule, she had no intention of not trying. In respons to an inquiring glance from her uncle she nodded.

Hank, in turn, shouted for a couple of handlers wh ran out and shortened the stirrup straps.

Then everybody got out of the arena except Joa and the stallion. She had the animal's reins in her han close up to his bit. She was gentling him and talking t him.

Phoebe, who was not paying any attention to the pe formance, had gotten herself interested in a discussio of the problem of the woman of genius who marries man of ordinary attainments. She quite frankly use Skippy as exhibit A.

"Never mind about me and whether I'm brigh enough for you or not," Skippy requested. And then h hauled the conversation back to the original topic fro which it had strayed so far. "I want," he said, "to siz up this potbellied peewee you're thinkin' of marryi and see if I'll let you or not."

"Oh. Unfortunately for your program he's not a riving until tomorrow afternoon. I'll be a free woma by then. For an hour or so I'll have no husband at a Besides, what could you do to stop me, my fine-featheree friend?"

"That," Skippy observed darkly, "remains to be see Gees cripes! Did you see the fall that kid took?"

Phoebe, as she looked at the arena, came out of he pose of brutal, sophisticated indifference and put he

hand to her mouth in the universal gesture of a woman stifling a scream.

"It's Joan," said Paulette to the men.

"I know," said Steve without taking his eyes off the slight figure lying motionless in the dust and tanbark. The stallion had evidently reared and dumped Joan off backward over his rump.

Steve wet his lips with the tip of his tongue as he prayed that Joan would scramble to her feet and run for the corral gate.

But she didn't. And it was too far from the gate for anyone to reach her in the time that would be left before the stallion swung around the ring and came back to trample her with his sharp, heavy hoofs.

Steve didn't really think. But a picture flashed across his brain of something that once as a stunt man he had done in a similar situation with a camera turning. That, though, had been rehearsed a dozen times first, and the horse knew exactly what he was supposed to do even better than Steve did.

Still the blueprint of the action was the same. Steve's muscles were getting ready automatically. Almost without volition his legs took him over the rail in front of the box, and he crouched there in an attitude that he remembered would give him the most momentum when he launched himself into the air.

The stallion, speeding riderless around the circle, crossed the imaginary line where Steve, in rehearsing the stunt for the picture, had always begun to count the hoofbeats.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, and go!"

The timing was still good. Steve's body was going through the air as the faster-moving horse arrived at the point of meeting.

The man was astride the astonished horse!

No time to find the shortened stirrups. But Steve did

manage to lean over and retrieve the reins of the bridl

The presence of Steve on his back effectively distracte the attention of the stallion from everything else whic had happened in his life right up to that moment. H whirled first and leaped in the air.

Steve was still there.

The horse reared, the same trick which had di mounted Joan. It worked again. That is, Steve slid o the rump but stepped sideways as the animal tried t fall where he had been, and when the four-legged mu derer scrambled to his feet Steve was on his back agai

They both took a few seconds for thought an breathing.

Steve, out of the corner of his eye, stole a cautiou glance at the place where Joan had been. She was on he knees now and, rising to her feet, she started uncertainl toward him.

"No! No!" he shouted. "Get back of the fence. I nee room."

Two Dover cow hands were at her side by that time and they forced her from the field, half dragging her.

The distraction while Steve was watching anxiousl for Joan's arrival at the safety gate was all the stallion needed. He sunfished and jumped sideways.

Steve landed on his shoulders in the tanbark onc more. But this time the horse was still on his own feet and he had no intention of letting Steve get up again.

The horse bared his strong white teeth in what probl ably passes for a grin among the equine aristocracy an came at Steve like a rocking-horse gone berserk, first hi front feet high in the air and then his hind feet. If h landed with either set Steve would look like a punche meal ticket, and Steve knew it.

So did the crowd which waited, breathless, for th impending tragedy.

But Steve, no showman really, disappointed his pub

lic. He also disappointed the horse. When the front hoofs went up for the *coup de grâce* Steve rolled clear under them, out of the stallion's range of vision. When the rear hoofs went up and descended next time, Steve was standing at the flank on the off side where horses seldom expect to find large, rough gentlemen like Steve, and, closing in to avoid a kick, he yanked and pushed the animal off balance and rolled him over on his back. The fall jarred the horse considerably, and he got up, dazed, and almost entirely indifferent to the fact that that man was there again, firmly perched on his back with long, strong legs wrapped around his belly in a grip that it seemed rather foolish to try to break.

So they compromised. The stallion took Steve for a nice quiet ride three times around the ring, and then Steve let him go out through the safety gate and turned him over to the circle of his friends where he found himself not any too welcome. Dover horses weren't supposed to return to their stalls with live Seeleys on their backs.

Steve, however, who thought Dovers were people, no matter what had happened in the past, inquired solicitously for Joan even before he dismounted.

"She's comin' out of it okay, mister," said one of the hands, a nice youngster, allowing himself a slightly friendly grin. "Doc Blaufus says she ain't got nothin' but bruises. Thanks for savin' her life. My name's Jim Baxter."

"Oh." Steve threw a leg over the saddle and slid to the ground. "Engaged to her?" he asked.

"No, but I'd try to be if we weren't cousins." The boy blushed. "She's swell if anybody asks me."

"Which nobody is apt to." Hank brushed Jim aside with a sweep of his arm as he faced Steve, who still had the stallion's bridle in his hand. "You know lots of tricks, don't you, Seeley?"

"The name's Boyd. But never mind. I don't insist o it. This is a nice little horse you've got, Mr. Dover. I you ever want to sell him I know a lady in Los Angele who is looking for a gentle ambler about the size an speed of your little pet. She's just learning to ride, s she needs a mount that's practically a hundred percen safe like old Dobbin here."

He stroked the stallion's nose, and the stallion, wh didn't understand enough English to know how grossl he had been insulted, liked it.

But Hank Dover turned nearly black with suffocate rage. The words he wanted to use got jammed in hi larynx. He yanked the stallion's bridle from Steve's hand and looked around for someone to hand it to.

"I know you think he is a gentle, well-trained animal,' Steve continued in an even voice, "or you wouldn't hav let your niece ride him."

It would have been pretty hard to overlook the im plication in Steve's statement, even though it had beer delivered in a low, unexcited drawl.

Several of the Dover boys backed away hastily fron Steve; evidently they did not particularly trust thei leader's marksmanship.

But actual hostilities were averted, at least temporarily by the arrival of Scott and Sears of the Seeley outfit.

"You're comin' over to our corral now like we wantec you to in the first place," Sears announced without pre amble. "My gosh, man, you'd oughta learn to take better care of your Sunday clothes. Look at them pants. You'l have to dress different next time you start to wrassle a horse."

Chapter Nine: A GLUTTON FOR PEACE

OVER AT THE BOXED-S CORRAL Scott Seeley suggested tha Steve replace his torn and grimy civilian suit with the

clothes that Scott himself had been wearing—the oversized rodeo, or fancy cowboy, outfit. Scott had his regular clothes there at the temporary stable sheds.

"I have to go back to the office anyhow," Scott assured him, "and read proof on the special rodeo souvenir edition of the Outlaw *Post,* mailed to anybody anywhere in the United States for ten cents. I guess I'll have to open up the front-page form and put in a social item about you and Hank Dover's stallion, Hellfire, meeting and falling in love." He began to take off his clothes and hand them to Steve. "I ain't really at my best riding herd on a typewriter with chaps and spurs."

Steve filled out the costume better than Scott had. In point of fact, Steve looked more like the popular idea of a Western horseman than any of the rest.

"Shift your hardware from under your arm to over your hip," Sears suggested as he looked Steve over critically after they had rigged him out.

"I can't get it so fast from there," Steve objected mildly.

"You won't have to get it at all," Scott assured him as he put on his own "city clothes," complete with necktie. "You've established your reputation in these parts. There won't be anybody apt to pull a gun on you again, not after you knocked the pearl handle off of Hank Dover's favorite heirloom."

The rodeo went on interminably. Steve got very bored with the yipping of men and the frightened bellowing of steers learning about bulldogging for the first time. Steve did not take part in any of the events, but he hung around the corral with the handlers, who were too respectful to be audibly curious as to how he happened to know so much about making a kitten out of a wild horse.

He did not want to go out to the grandstand seats again for a couple of reasons. The fact that he was wearing cowboy clothes was not one of them. He had worn

chaps and big hats over a long enough period in his earlier life so that he felt perfectly at home in the costume and after a few minutes actually did forget that he had it on.

But for one thing he thought it would be embarrassing to receive Phoebe Dover's thanks for his part in rescuing her daughter. And the other reason was that if he did anything at all in public he might run foul of Hank Dover. Their paths seemed to tangle unpleasantly, and Steve found that even he, himself, with a firm predilection for peace, was beginning to hate the active head of the Dover clan with an emotional intensity which would probably have been highly approved by his grandfather, Sam Seeley. Steve did not analyze his animosity very closely. If he had he might have been amused to find that most of it sprang, not from anything Hank Dover had done to him or his family, but from the way he had treated Joan Gunnarson, his own niece. For all Steve knew they might be the best of pals; perhaps Hank carried the child upstairs on his shoulder every night before she said her prayers and was tucked into her little bed, but just the same no man ought to risk the life of a feminine sprat on a vicious animal like Hellfire.

No, Steve didn't want to have any more traffic with Hank Dover or, for that matter, any of the Dovers. They were too damn quarrelsome. Steve was a glutton for peace. He dwelt upon that fact morosely.

As there was no very good place for morose dwelling on that or any other subject in the arena or near it, Steve allowed his feet to take him out into the red rock canyon which straggled past the village of Outlaw and headed for nowhere in particular up toward the Navaho reservation. It wasn't very beautiful, not to anybody who had seen considerable red rock anyway, and it wasn't deep enough to inspire any great amount of awe in the most casual sight-seer.

When the sound of distant shouting and applause indicated that the show in the rodeo arena was over, Steve was about to go back to where his car was parked when he noticed a couple of mounted men coming up the canyon at a fairly rapid pace, considering that there were on the canyon floor many scattered, small, loose rocks which always slow down even sure-footed mountain-bred ponies.

Steve waited where he was on a slightly higher shoulder. They did not look up as they passed and consequently did not see him. Steve did not hail them because the riders were Hank Dover and his foreman. Naturally Steve did not expect any effusive cordiality from either of them, although he still didn't know why the hired foreman, who was presumably no Dover kin, should have animosity toward a complete stranger like himself. It was all a part of the half-childish mystery of this county that had been held back half a century by the stalking presence of an ancient quarrel.

Steve, who felt himself slipping from the impartially critical point of view of the seated spectator to an active part in the costume comedy, shrugged his shoulders as he watched the two horses carefully single-footing by. He wondered idly for a moment where the men were heading and then decided that they must, naturally, be on their way to the Ring-Bar-X. There are only about two places a cowman can go. One of them is "to town" and the other is "back home." Which way he is headed at the moment depends pretty much on where he has just been.

Hank and Albany disappeared finally among the gathering wisps of blue mist which usually cling to the lower walls of these jagged gashes in the red Arizona limestone. They come mostly at sundown. The Indians don't like them. They say they are lost spirits trying to find their way out.

Steve was about to climb down from his point of vantage. But the advent of a pedestrian coming, like himself, from the rodeo grounds made him wait.

It was Phoebe. In that dress which clung a little even in a windless place like the bottom of the canyon she looked like another spirit, but a much lovelier one than any that an Indian could think up.

It puzzled him that she should be walking on a trail which even men traversed on horseback. He thought that perhaps he ought to offer to escort her. Still, even though that was a gallant and polite impulse, it was also damn foolishness. Nothing could be sillier than escorting the daughter of the House of Dover to her doorstep.

In a moment he was glad that he had not obeyed the impulse. There were hoofbeats once more, and one of the horses which had gone up the canyon returned. Albany was riding it.

He stopped beside Phoebe, dismounted, and took her in his arms. It seemed to Steve that Phoebe did not yield much some way or help the way a woman should do. Considering the material he had to work with, Albany was rather graceful about it. He preserved an air of romanticism. It was that, probably, which held the jaded interest of Phoebe, the sensation seeker.

They walked slowly on up the canyon, the lover and the student of social relations.

Steve thoughtfully returned to the rodeo grounds. There were many tents and buildings scattered around near the arena, and some of them were beginning to show lights. One, with a canvas roof, proved to be a temporary restaurant. Steve thought he was more appropriately dressed for a place of that sort than he was for the Commercial House and went in. There were a few punchers there and a good many tourists too. The food was being served on long dining-room tables with

all the extra leaves in, and the service and cooking were by weather-beaten, middle-aged women who automatically classified themselves as ranchers' wives and helpers.

No one paid any particular attention to Steve, which he took as a sincere compliment to the way he wore his costume. He ate at a table full of chattering women who were staying in town one entire day to get atmosphere, but they seemed to be loaded with it already and wanted to talk to each other about their experiences rather than to ask Steve any questions.

That was fine with Steve, and he enjoyed the meal, together with a cigarette which he was careful to roll rather clumsily with both hands and light with a match scratched on the under side of the table. Doing tricks had already gotten him into plenty of trouble for that day.

Steve loitered among the exhibition buildings, which were advertised to be open until ten o'clock. He didn't see anything he hadn't seen before at similar county exhibitions, but it was something to do which looked like more fun than returning to the hotel.

He looked at a great many different kinds of preserves, apples, grapes, squashes, cakes, pies, fancy needlework, baskets, and Indian blankets. Some of the more edible exhibits he sampled.

In an hour or so he arrived at the livestock building, which consisted of a double line of sheds with doors facing each other across a wide roofed-over passageway. It smelled good in there; at least it smelled good to anyone who liked the fresh, sweet odor of well-cared-for animals all mixed in with the fragrance of new-mown hay, clean straw, and the dampness of earth just wet down enough to hold the dust. There was a faint aroma of polished leather too. Steve found that it came from a room midway of the corridor, where harness was hung, not sweaty draft harness but the light saddle-soaped gear

of trotting-horses. The stables, Steve deduced, were used not only for the fat-stock show but served also as temporary headquarters for the gaited thoroughbreds of the local racing world. It was slightly surprising that anyone owned any pacers or trotters in cow country such as this. Usually trials of equine speed in the Rocky Mountain division are "flat," or pony, races. Sulkies are rarely seen west of Texas. The horses were at the far end of the passage. Steve could hear them kicking at their half doors and occasionally neighing to one another.

Steve liked horses better than anything else on four legs and maybe better than most things on two legs, so he was making his way toward that end of the huge barn when his attention was arrested by a hail that came unmistakably from one of the nearer sheds. It wasn't exactly a cry for help, but there was panic in the tone even if not in the words which were simply: "Hey! Somebody lend a hand!"

No one else seemed around to answer, and, besides, the cry was in a feminine voice, so Steve kicked himself soundly a couple of times by way of reminder that he was about to do something foolish again and opened the door from behind which the cry seemed to come.

"Just as I expected," he said as he surveyed the scene by the light of a single low-power electric bulb on a drop cord. "I knew it was either your voice or Pedro's."

She peered at him uncertainly. "Oh, it's you? In those clothes I naturally—"

"I understand your perplexity. But it's me all right. This is my second-act costume."

"You look more natural. I haven't thanked you yet for this afternoon."

"I'd rather you wouldn't."

"I know. But I was brought up to be polite. Besides, a girl has to do something to show her appreciation for

the gift of more life. I thought my number was up."

"So did I. But that's over. Which one of you two is in trouble this time?"

It was a foolish question, because Pedro was lying down and Joan was standing up.

"Both of us," Joan told Steve seriously, "but my trouble is only worry because Pedro has gone to sleep again."

"Why not let the poor devil get some rest. Maybe he's just tired."

"He hasn't had his supper, and, besides, Doctor Blaufus said he must be kept awake until the poison wore off."

"Poison? You didn't tell me your steer had been poisoned."

"No. We didn't know about that ourselves until the doctor arrived. That was after you left. He gave Pedro a hypodermic that made him kind of sick. But he got over wanting to go to sleep for a while, and we, Doctor Blaufus and I, managed to get him out here."

"How in the name of suffering rattlesnakes did your steer get poisoned? Is he allergic to something?"

"I haven't the least idea how Pedro could have gotten hold of anything he shouldn't have eaten. Neither does anybody, except my uncle Henry—that's Henry Dover—and he thinks you did it."

"Naturally. Well, give my regards to Uncle Henry for his vote of confidence. You don't agree with him, I take it."

"No. You didn't have a chance because you hadn't met Pedro when he began to get dopey. Besides, you're not the type. It takes a pretty low form of humanity to poison an animal just to get even with an enemy."

"Thanks."

"Besides, I know you are entirely capable of fighting your battles against us Dovers out in the open."

Steve looked sharply at Joan to see if she was kidding.

She wasn't. Like everybody else in the county, she apparently took the Dover-Seeley feud seriously.

"Listen, kid," he said, "I'm not fighting against anybody. And I haven't any enemies around here. I never saw this town before today, and if I never see it again after tomorrow that'll be all right with me. Besides, I'm a peaceable hombre anyhow. I don't care who wins any kind of a fight. Now then, my belligerent little numbskull, what do we do next about your somnolent fat friend here? Have you tried giving him coffee?"

"Pails of it. There's a little left in that one over there."

Steve sniffed at it.

"I meant *good* coffee."

"That's good coffee. I made it myself."

"Pardon me."

"No."

"All right. No pardon then! Coffee like this causes more divorces than all the triangle situations in all the movies that were ever written. Let me show you how to make coffee. One of my missions in life is to go around the world teaching women how to extract the juice from humble coffee berries in such a manner that men marry 'em just to get more of it. Now no self-respecting male, even a steer, would stay awake for this coffee. Where's the stove?"

"It's outside. Naturally no one is allowed to have a fire of any kind inside the stables. Do you really think you can do it better than I?"

"Listen, my child, when Pedro even smells my coffee he's probably going to get up and begin crying for it."

"All right. Stop talking and do something. Grab one of those galvanized pails. Here's the coffee. Water at the pump outside. And please hurry. I don't like Pedro's looks."

"That makes it unanimous."

Chapter Ten: COFFEE FOR PEDRO

STEVE WAS BUSY OUTSIDE for quite a while. There was a cross corridor at the harness room which was not far from Pedro's stall. He found the stove, a two-burner kerosene affair, just beyond the side entrance. It was ordinarily used for concocting bran mashes and other such delicacies for ailing stock, as could easily be deduced from the dried mash still clinging to various parts of the stove. Fortunately the burners were clean and they worked.

In twenty minutes or so Steve came back with a pail of coffee. He heard voices inside, one of them masculine, but he entered anyway.

A broad-beamed man in overalls and a derby hat was leaning over Pedro, listening to his heart.

Steve waited in the doorway for him to finish.

The man straightened up. "It is not good, my little Joan."

"You mean, Heinie, that his heart is slowing up?"

"Yes, *liebchen,* I am sorry to say that." He lifted his head, sniffed, and said, "Coffee! Good coffee!"

Steve came closer. Joan introduced them.

"Doctor Blaufus, this is Mr. Boyd."

"Did you make this excellent coffee?" the veterinary asked, pushing his spectacles up to roost on his forehead.

"Why, yes," Steve admitted modestly, but not very.

"Quick, my little Joan, give to me that tin cup. I will try it, and after that we will maybe do some good to Pedro with it."

Steve liked the huge, aged veterinary at once. Dr. Blaufus had a rough, kindly way with him which made it easy to understand why he was so popular with everybody in the county. He had a large unofficial practice

even among human beings, Steve learned later. He didn't prescribe drugs but he told people about home remedies which they could concoct themselves. Sometimes he set bones when there was no one else near to do it. And locally his horse liniment was practically the universal cure for bruises, sprains, coughs, colds, rheumatism, and neuralgia. He didn't sell it for those ailments, but he couldn't know what customers did with it after they bought it, could he?

Dr. Blaufus still approved of Steve's coffee after he had drunk two cups of it. By that time the remainder of the liquid stimulant in the pail was cool enough so that it could be poured down Pedro's throat through a funnel.

"He takes it docilely enough," said Steve.

"That is not a good sign," sighed the veterinary. "I like it better animals which I have to choke them a little when I do them some good."

He seemed genuinely concerned over his lack of power to help the steer. Part of that Steve attributed to his affection for Joan. They were obviously pals of long standing. The rest was true devotion to his profession and to humane principles. Some of the finest men in the medical profession devote their sympathetic skill to creatures who can neither thank them nor complain.

"How much longer?" Joan asked.

"An hour, maybe two or three, unless you say I should put my needle into his heart and make it stop now."

"No."

"Then go home, little Joan. I will stay."

"No, Heinie, he is mine, about the only thing that really is mine, and I think I'd rather be here to say good-by when he goes."

The veterinary and Steve sat silent a moment. For Steve it was especially difficult to find anything to say. He couldn't even think of any very good way to leave.

Blaufus spoke finally: "I remember when first your uncle gave that Pedro to you. He was something very funny on four stilts with a tail. Henry, I think, didn't believe then that Pedro was much good. But you have raised him into the best steer in the county. Tomorrow he would have got it, the blue ribbon—"

"We mustn't feel badly, Heinie," Joan interrupted. "Remember you taught me yourself that tomorrow is sometimes only a promise which is a guiding star for today, and even if it never comes—"

Dr. Blaufus filled in the pause. "That's a poetic kind of an idea which I got it from my home in the old country, where the Fatherland was a place where sometimes we made songs instead of war. Maybe the idea ain't so good any more." He shook his head.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, Jim."

Steve looked at the door. It was Baxter, the young cow hand he had met in the Dover corral that afternoon. He stood in the doorway, turning his hat around nervously in his hands.

"Something wrong, Jimmie?" asked the veterinary.

"Well—er—I don't know if there is or not. I just thought I'd ought to tell you all that Hank is on the grounds. He's lookin' for Mr. Boyd and—"

"How'd you know I was here?" Steve asked sharply.

"I just figgered out where I'd be, and sure enough I was right."

"Come in, Jim," Joan invited. To Steve she said, "I think you'd better go."

Baxter closed the half door after himself. Heinie asked him, "Is Hank drunk?"

"He's been drinkin'. You know how he gets, not unsteady, but his face is dark like it was under a cloud."

Steve remembered the last he had seen of Henry Dover, disappearing into the mists of the red granite

canyon. He was certainly perfectly sober then. But that was several hours past. Steve was inclined to agree with Joan. It would be wisdom on his part to keep out of sight for a while, if not entirely for his own sake, then for hers. She was a nice kid, and there was no sense in having her young life cluttered up with acts of medieval violence. If her uncle, who was old enough to know better, wanted to pretend Wild West, let him hunt up somebody else besides Stephen Boyd for a romp. Nobody had been badly hurt yet, but it did not seem likely that they could continue to play games indefinitely without bloodshed.

Steve started toward the door. "I'll be at the Commercial House if anybody thinks I can help," he said and added to Joan, "I'm sorry about your pet."

"Thanks."

Before Steve could touch the latch the door opened and Hank Dover strode in.

Chapter Eleven: NO HOLDS BARRED

HANK DID NOT IDENTIFY STEVE AT FIRST and was starting to brush past him. He was not expecting to run into his recently acquired enemy in cowboy costume.

When he did notice who it was he stopped in his tracks.

Not a thing was said by anyone. It was like watching a sleepwalker on a masonry ledge around a high building. It seemed that, maybe, if no one made a sound the situation still could be saved some way. Perhaps it would turn out to be only a bad dream from which one could awaken.

Then Hank made an almost imperceptible move toward his holster. But even that movement stopped, frozen, just as it was begun. Steve had not even started to reach for his gun. He knew he had plenty of time

after Hank had actually begun to draw.

So did Hank. Finally Hank let his hand drop to his side. Maybe he was sober after all.

He spoke casually to his niece. "How about your steer? I thought I'd come over and inquire. Is the doc goin' to be able to fix him up?"

Joan, not shifting her gaze, which included both men, said, "No."

Hank stepped on past Steve as if he had not been there. "What do you mean, Joan? Ain't the critter goin' to pull through?"

"Doctor Blaufus is afraid not," she replied.

Hank went on past Joan to the sleeping animal. "Then I reckon I better put a bullet in him and get it over with."

His back was toward Steve now, but he had drawn his gun—ostensibly to kill the steer.

No one thought that was his real reason for getting the revolver out of its holster. Baxter flashed a warning glance at Steve, who reassured him with a smile.

Dr. Blaufus edged imperceptibly closer to Hank.

Joan was the one who spoke. "Put up your gun, Uncle; I've decided to give Pedro a last chance."

He answered her, which gave him a chance to turn part way around. "Nonsense. Don't be a dumb brat all your life. What difference does it make? I'll give you another calf tomorrow."

"Look out!" Warning from Baxter.

The revolver bullet hit the ceiling. Steve had not touched his own gun because he had seen what the old hulking veterinary was up to.

Dr. Blaufus had clamped his right hand around Hank's gun and shoved it up, at the same time reaching for the weapon with his other hand. He was not in time to prevent Hank from firing once, but he effectively put a stop to any further fireworks for the moment by

wrenching the gun from Hank's grip and throwing it through the window.

Hank, cursing unpicturesquely in the vernacular of the sewer digger, turned on the kindly veterinary. "You've interfered too goddamn often around here."

Hank struck him with his fist across the mouth. Half a dozen teeth fell out.

Then Steve did withdraw his own gun from its holster.

"Don't, Steve!" pleaded Joan.

Steve laughed. "I'm not going to shoot your great big yellow-bellied uncle. I just wanted to get this out of my way."

He tossed the weapon in the general direction of the manger. Jimmy Baxter picked it out of the air.

"Nice goin', kid," Steve told him. "Now unload it and drop the shells on the floor, will you? Then nobody'll be tempted to use it."

The young cowpuncher hesitated. "He's an awful rough fighter."

"So am I. Bust her open."

Baxter broke the gun at the breech, and the cartridges dropped in the straw. It would take half an hour to find them.

Hank Dover laughed. He didn't wait for any preliminaries but came right for Steve and aimed a kick at his stomach.

It nearly landed.

In a way it was an advantage to have the head of the Dover clan start off that way. Now Steve knew what to expect.

"If you have any idea of trying that again," Steve warned, "I'll split your legs apart right up to your Adam's apple."

So Hank tried something else, a roundhouse to Steve's ear, which fortunately he had just that moment thought

to move closer to the ground.

A roundhouse is a blow which leaves the owner thereof a little shaky, especially if it misses. And more especially if someone else sort of gets in underneath and pushes against the chin.

Hank sat down for a moment to think things over. Apparently he arrived at some sort of conclusion because he got to his feet again rather quickly and rushed at Steve in a more scientific crouch than he had used to open the ceremonies. Steve thought he really meant it and prepared to block. But instead of coming in Hank dived low and with his head hit Steve a vicious blow below the belt. The impact made even the Marquis of Queensberry, long years in his grave, slightly ill. Steve had to turn away and double up in order to relieve the agony. He also had to decide whether to die right then and there or not. Hank took advantage of his opponent's unprotected attitude and kicked him savagely.

Steve turned just in time to see the elderly but elephantine Dr. Blaufus, still spitting teeth out of his mouth, coming to his assistance.

"Keep out of this!" Steve warned. "I'm still able to handle two gasbags his size. Ouch!"

The involuntary exclamation was tribute to Hank's fist on Steve's jaw.

It took Steve just about so long to get mad enough to fight in earnest. Up to that time it always seemed sort of silly.

Steve was mad now.

The first Hank knew about it was a terrific hook to his eye. Steve had meant it for the ear, but Hank's eye got in the way and, after all, what difference did it make? Except perhaps to Hank.

Hank's vision suffered a fifty-percent impairment for the moment. But he could still think and he sorted over

in his mind half a dozen things that would be pleasant to do to Steve. He finally selected a sock on the nose, a very good one too. Steve fortunately had on the reddish sort of bandanna dustcloth that had been part of Scott Seeley's outfit, so the results did not look quite so bad as if he had been wearing the white shirt which went with his ordinary costume. He knew that he was bleeding though from the salty taste in his mouth, so he drove Hank into a corner with an assortment of punches which he picked up here and there, some from the ground, and gave him a sort of final punch in the chest on the spot known in boxing and medical circles as the solar plexus.

Hank's knees seemed to be sagging under him, so Steve turned away to find another corner to lean up against himself.

There must have been some error about the idea that Hank's knees were giving out. As soon as Steve's back was turned something hit him on the top of his head. He had to lie down right then and there, and flat on his face too. That hurt his nose. If it hadn't been for the pain in the nasal appendage and the general saltiness of his features, Steve would probably have rested there where it seemed so soft and comfortable.

As it was, he dragged himself to his feet and hunted up Hank, who was waltzing uncertainly all by himself, and clinched with him. They did very well, considering there was no music, until Steve happened to remember that he was mad at his partner, so he hauled away just far enough to push Hank's jaw around toward his left ear. Hank simply had to devote all his attention to putting it back into place, and while he was at it Steve, who had learned in the last few minutes not to be a little gentleman, recalled something from way back in the days when he was on his high-school football team and did it as well as he could without having ten other

men to help him. The trick consists roughly of putting an elbow between a couple of semi-floating ribs and then pounding on the forearm until the ribs come loose from their anchorage and really float free, hither and yon, like a fan dancer's only visible means of support. This maneuver makes a very neat repair job for the surgeon later.

Hank noticed what Steve had done. It took his mind off the trouble he was having with his jaw long enough for him to knock Steve flat on his back and start to kick him in the head. Steve had learned not to stay down, however, and he rolled to one side and got up, not in his full pristine strength, but robustly enough to swing with unexpected precision on Hank's right, or other, eye.

After that Hank's perceptions, if any, were decidedly dim. Aware of this himself, he took no chances but clinched with Steve so that he would always know where he was.

From there on the fighting became rough. It lasted only two or three minutes, although it is only fair to say out of deference to the prowess and vitality of both parties that it would not have ended so soon had it not been for the fact that Hank in his blindness backed Steve into Pedro. They both fell over the sleeping animal, Steve striking his head so hard on a stanchion supporting the manger that it knocked him completely out.

Hank would probably have choked or beaten Steve to death as a result of this unexpected advantage, except for the fact that Pedro, disturbed by the riot which had been going on all around, suddenly roused from his torpor and, as he did so, more or less negligently stuck one of his short, stubby horns (cut off and capped with metal) into the place in Hank's chest where the ribs were loose anyway. The added pain put all thoughts of everything but his own personal suffering out of Hank's

head. He rolled away from Pedro.

Joan opened the door to the outside passageway.

Baxter looked at her inquiringly.

Joan nodded.

He gave Hank a little push so that he rolled on through. Baxter followed.

Joan closed the lower part of the half door.

Baxter leaned in for a moment. "Here's that other fella's gun." She took it. "What'll I do with your uncle?"

"Find one of our cars around somewhere and take him to a doctor."

"Okay, Joan. How about him?" He nodded toward the recumbent form of Steve.

"Doctor Blaufus will take care of him, I guess."

As a matter of fact, the veterinary was already bending over Steve while his other patient, Pedro, was wandering around loose in the shed, now thoroughly wide awake and wondering why his mouth tasted so much like that brownish-green stuff they scrape off from the bottom of a swimming pool. Or he would have wondered that if he had known about swimming-pools.

Chapter Twelve: VENUS FROM THE STRAW

STEPHEN BOYD AWAKENED to the sound of the crunching of corn between strong bovine teeth. He heard the noise and identified it while his eyes were still shut. He was not even sure that he *could* open his eyes.

He discovered among other things that he was lying on straw with a blanket under his head. Gradually the events which had preceded his unconsciousness shaped themselves together into a pattern. From the memory of what had happened and from the evidence of his awakening senses he deduced that Hank Dover had not killed him, as he seemed intent on doing, and that he was still in the stall of Pedro who, for some reason or

other, was alive and eating.

Steve experimentally opened an eye.

He was right. He himself was lying on the floor with one horse blanket under his head and another over his body—there is an unmistakable smell about horse blankets, unknown to most members of the last two or three generations—and Pedro, wide awake, was making the peaceable grinding sound of kine at their almost continuous occupation of eating.

Steve guessed that he had been not so much asleep as unconscious. The throbbing pain on the top of his head lent color to that supposition. He wondered if Hank had knocked him out and why, if he had, he had not finished him off. Judging from the way he fought, Hank would have had no scruples about hitting or kicking an opponent just because he was down.

There were voices. For a moment or so Steve could not fit them to personalities, and he had no desire to turn his head to look. Then gradually he recognized the sweet, husky tones of Joan Gunnarson and the slightly Teutonic rumble of the old veterinary.

The latter was urging the girl to some course of action.

Steve didn't hear what the doctor was saying exactly. It sounded all mushed up.

Apparently Joan was also having difficulty in understanding the veterinary. "Heinie, darling," she said, "your teeth must have slipped again."

There was a muttered reply, then a click. "There," said the old man, "I got that *verdammt* plate once more where it sticks. This set is my Sunday teeth. I can't even eat in 'em very good."

"It's lucky you had them along though."

"I always carry them for a spare. A cow, she is apt to switch her tail, and boom goes my teeth."

If it hadn't hurt his head Steve would have laughed.

Those teeth then that Hank Dover had knocked out had been factory made.

"Now," said Joan, "tell me what you were saying when you got tangled up with your molars. Wait! First hand me that cartridge there by your left foot. That makes five we've found."

"Here it is. What I was saying, little Joan, is why not marry with some nice young feller and go from here entirely away?"

Joan laughed. It was a pleasant laugh but troubled.

"You know better than anyone, Heinie, that I cannot marry at all."

"No, I do not know any such a thing, *liebchen*. What you think is a reason—that I know, of course. But because your father is what we doctors—horse doctors even—call a pathological case is no reason that anything like that might happen also to you."

"Just the same," she said stubbornly, "I have no right to take that chance. I wouldn't marry unless I could have children."

"Go ahead. Have some. How many you want? Five? All right. Four will surely be okey-dokey and the fifth—"

"That's what I couldn't stand."

"Wait, what I was saying is the fifth will probably be a genius like your mamma. Wouldn't you like that?"

Steve had managed to turn his head. Joan, he thought, seemed pathetically immature to be burdened with the problems of hereditary insanity. She was like a charming little girl gravely playing with colored crayons, except that one of them was really a stick of dynamite.

Both the veterinary and the girl were on their hands and knees, searching in the straw as they talked. Joan had Steve's six-gun in her hand. It was open at the breech.

"Don't bother to look any longer, Heinie," she was saying. "I don't believe that sixth cartridge is where we

can find it."

The old horse doctor sighed and was getting up from his doubtless rheumatic knees. "Now, look," he said, stooping over again. "Here is it—only empty it is. That's like always. You stop looking for something and right away you find it."

Joan took the empty cartridge case from the old man's hand. "I'll put the brass shell in the cylinder anyway."

"Turn that one in line with the barrel," Blaufus advised, "so he gets not fooled if he expects to shoot sometime. The next cartridge turns up as somebody pulls the trigger."

Joan laughed patiently. "Heinie, darling, I used to eat my porridge with one of these things instead of a baby spoon."

"All right, smart Alice. When you get old you don't mind when somebody tells you something you know already, because sometimes you find out that what you know ain't necessarily so. Like for instance this business about your father. How could you tell it is insanity because he shoots somebody? Other men in your family have done some shootings, and they was not called crazy."

Joan was shaking her head. "But my father was not one of 'my family' in the sense you mean. He was Nels Gunnarson, a Scandinavian. His people did not 'shoot it out' with their enemies as we Western Americans used to. He was different and, besides, he was a poet. Poets are a little mad to begin with. And he loved my mother. That is something that seems to drive men slightly off balance, even if they are absolutely normal to begin with."

Dr. Blaufus sighed. "I knew your father. He was gentle and kind. He seemed not like one to shoot somebody. Maybe it never happened."

Joan replied in the cold, stiff voice of one who has schooled himself to look at a terrifying sight unmoved, "You've forgotten—I was there. I was only six years old—"

"Never mind, *liebchen;* it is not good to talk more about it."

"Let me. Sometimes I've felt that I must talk to someone, but there never is anyone."

"Then give out to old Heinie. What did you wish to tell?"

"It was about Rance Seeley mostly. I liked him. And Mother—" Joan stopped. The words had frozen on her lips. "I guess I can't tell even you. I thought I could." It was as if she tucked a secret horror, which had almost escaped, back into her youthful bosom.

Dr. Blaufus, as full of wisdom as he was of years, forbore to press her. Instead he reverted to the earlier topic of their conversation: "Just the same, old Heinie Blaufus he thinks you should marry and go somewhere far away."

"If I loved someone enough, but I don't."

"Too bad I think it is," Dr. Blaufus said slowly, "that young people who are lost at the crooked beginnings of what seem to be untraveled jungle trails cannot know what we eldern have found at the end of the road, which turns out to be a broad highway after all, that *who* you love makes so very little difference, just so long as you love *somebody.*"

"Thanks, Heinie, for caring about me. But I think I shall stay as I am, at least for a long time. I think it would make Mother very ill to become a grandmother."

Blaufus laughed. "She must face life sometime herself also. Which of you two is the mother, anyway—you or she?"

"She, of course."

"I've often wondered. Sometimes it seems she is nothing but only Phoebe Dover, not related to anyone, just someone hanging in space and time. I think she loves no one but the people in her stories, not even you very much, not enough, anyhow. And her husbands! You notice that never does she take the name of one of them."

Joan patted the ancient veterinary affectionately on the arm. "That's just the modern custom. You're an old darling, Heinie, to worry about my affairs, and if you insist on my having a husband I'll choose you."

"All right." Steve could imagine the twinkle in the old man's eye. "Tomorrow I will explain to Lena, my wife. Often she has asked me who you are in love with."

"I hope," said Joan soberly, "that you told her no one."

"Haven't you been—ever?"

"No, Heinie. I've never let myself be."

Blaufus snorted. "As if anybody had something to do about it for himself, especially if he is a girl."

"Do you know what I think, Heinie?"

"Usually, yes."

"Then you know that I think you are a very good veterinary physician but a terribly incompetent philosopher."

"No, I don't know that and I wouldn't admit it, anyhow."

"You don't have to. The evidence that you are a good veterinary stands there munching his cud, just as if nothing had happened. I believe he'll get the ribbon in his class tomorrow."

"I believe it my own self. But I did nothing to make Pedro to wake up. It was that good coffee and the kicks he got while the fighting was going on."

"What about your other patient?" the girl asked.

The veterinary came over and knelt beside Steve. The latter had closed his eyes. As a matter of fact, he felt a little ashamed of having listened so long without disclosing the fact that he had regained consciousness. Not that he had learned anything that he had not suspected already. Still he did not usually pry into other people's affairs except professionally.

Dr. Blaufus relinquished Steve's wrist. He had been counting the pulse. "This young man will be all right too. A headache and a few bruises; that's all. The Seeleys they are tough hombres, just like the Dovers. You have to kill them nine times, like cats."

"Then if he's all right and Pedro's all right I'll have to go over to the roundup dance at the Administration Building, I suppose."

"Why 'have to,' *liebchen?*" Dr. Blaufus got up from beside Steve and went back to Joan.

"I promised Mother I would. She wants to see how a debutante formal will look in a Wild-West setting. I'm to be inside the gown."

"You are not going all the way back to the ranch alone now to put on some fancy dressing just to please that woman, your mother?"

"Heinie, there is no one else in my life that I can do anything for—I can't help my father—so why not? Besides, I don't have to go all the way back to the ranch. The dress is in a box there on that bag of feed. I can get into it right here. Please close the door as you go out."

"I can take a hint, I think so, just as good as the next feller." But Dr. Blaufus looked doubtfully toward Steve. "But that Seeley—"

"He says his name is Boyd and, anyhow, he's unconscious."

"If you should wish it I could wait."

"No. You go home and get some sleep yourself before

you get called out to help some mare become a parent or something. I can handle everything here now. And thanks, Heinie, for everything."

As the veterinary started out the door Steve tried to struggle to a sitting position and call him back. But the effort made him dizzy, and for a moment his recently recovered consciousness deserted him again in a spasm of nausea. He just didn't care who did what so long as he himself did not have to move.

His lack of interest in life must have lasted some little time. When he opened his eyes again, not quite sure which of the imprints on his mind were recollections and which were dreams, he was startled to see Joan in nothing but the briefest of undergarments, two in number, if you didn't count high-heeled cowboy boots, sousing her face, arms and shoulders in a stock-watering bucket.

Steve was amused for a moment by the thought that if Joan's mother wanted a really incongruous picture of Paris against the cattle country she was missing a better example of it than she would ever get at a cowboy dance. Joan, youthfully slim but unmistakably feminine in the kind of skimpy lace panties that no one but the possessor of a perfect silhouette wears and a strip bandeau that was only noticeable because it was white and the girl herself was golden brown, was a model such as the late Raphael Kirchener could have made immortal in the pages of *La Vie Parisienne.*

Steve convinced himself with some degree of success that the only reason he looked at Joan long enough so that he afterward discovered he could never forget her was because his head happened to be turned in her direction when he opened his eyes.

To print an ineradicable impression of her unexpected delicate loveliness took only a few seconds really. So perhaps he lingered a little longer than was positively

necessary before he turned his face to the wall. Steve didn't exactly know yet why he turned away at all. Deep reflection convinced him that it was a minor victory of the decadent age of chivalry over curiosity.

He could hear the water sloshing around for a couple of minutes more, followed by an interval of silence which he interpreted as a drying period, then the rustle of silk and a muttered "damn" or two, which was probably an impatient reaction to a zipper that wouldn't zip or a snap that wouldn't snap. Next two maidenly grunts a few seconds apart—the inevitable accompaniment to removing boots. More silence. That would be stockings, Steve figured, long ones that probably fastened to some kind of a harness, and slippers. He knew they were long stockings from the rustling noise she made from then on as she moved about the cowshed, adding the final touches to her toilet.

"Now," said Joan's voice with a ripple of concealed laughter in it, "you may look again, Mr. Boyd."

Steve almost turned to obey her command invitation. Then he suddenly remembered a smoking-room story that he had heard and suspected instantly that her remark was only a ruse to see if he was conscious and had been peeking.

So he rigidly controlled his impulse and even added a low groan to his impersonation, just for realism.

He congratulated himself on having done the gentlemanly thing.

She moved around the shed for a few moments more. Then he heard the two halves of the door being opened.

Then they closed.

Steve permitted himself a gusty sigh of relief. He was getting a little cramped holding one position. He rolled over and sat up.

There she was, standing by the door, which she had

opened and shut without going through it.

The gown was all white, chiffon probably; anyway, it flared a long length from her waist to the tips of her white satin shoes. The bodice of the dress was just right, a little girlish, that is, in front. In back there wasn't any, but Steve didn't know that yet.

All she needed was a wand with a diamond star on the end of it to look like a fairy princess.

Except that when she saw the expression on Steve's face she laughed, a very lovely laugh, but filled with genuine amusement, nonetheless, and opened the door.

This time she really went out.

To Steve it seemed, for a moment, as if all other light did too.

Chapter Thirteen: PURE FICTION—PLOT FORTY-SEVEN

STEVE HAD IT ALL FIGURED OUT by the time he got back to the Commercial House in town.

What had happened, according to his maturely sophisticated theory, was that he had been hypnotically dazzled by the sudden transformation of a rather formless, homely tomboy into a young person with normally nice feminine contours who, by comparison with the hoyden in pants, was a startling beauty. It was merely a matter of contrast. Any change from a sow's ear is magic, even if the result is not quite a silk purse.

Those Park Avenue dressmakers certainly were wonderful.

That's all it was—just the clever trick of a French designer. What he was remembering with a savor which was almost hunger was merely a very nice gown. Anyone who wore it would look like a million dollars in it. The only thing that bothered Steve at all in his reconstruction of the event was that at several times in his life he had seen women in French frocks—once even in a fashion

parade right in Paris, with mannequins picked for their ability to display clothes. He couldn't remember any of those gowns or any of the lovely young ladies who wore them. Oh, well, the setting had been different. Stick most any wench in dainty, shimmering formal attire against the drab setting of a cowshed, and she'd probably shine like a glowworm in the dark of the moon.

It was nice to have that matter logically explained.

When Steve stopped at the hotel desk to get his key the clerk said, "The gentleman you were expecting got your key half an hour ago and went up to wait for you."

"Oh," said Steve, and then he added, "Thanks!" in case the clerk might think he was surprised, which he was.

Steve wasn't expecting anyone, and he did not even know any gentleman in that part of the country, except the ones he had become acquainted with that very day. None of them would be likely to pay him a visit. Besides, they would all be known to the clerk, and he would have mentioned the caller by name.

For a moment Steve was mad enough to think of protesting. No hotel clerk had a right to give the key to his room to anyone else. Then he realized that the young man who was grinning at him so engagingly across the pine counter was only about seventeen years of age and that he probably knew no more about the rights of hotel guests than the six-month-old puppy he resembled.

After all, this wasn't the Waldorf.

No indeed, it wasn't the Waldorf, not built as it was of weather-beaten lumber, unpainted since the year the auto camp just outside of town had opened for business, with no elevator and steep flights of stairs to the top floor, where Steve's room was located.

As he climbed the endless steps Steve recalled that no one with an ounce of mechanical ability and a bent nail would need a key to open the lock on his door anyway. The fact that the gentleman caller had asked for the key at all augured that he was there on a peaceful mission.

There was a strong odor of tobacco smoke, pipe smoke, sifting around the edges of his bedroom door. Steve knew several men who smoked pipes. But this brand of tobacco smell did not belong to any of them.

His door opened in.

Steve stood a moment in the frame before entering the room.

A tall, thin man sat in a straight chair, leaning back on two of its legs against the wall. The smoke came from a pipe with a short, curved stem which hung from the right side of his mouth.

He was clean shaven and had a grayish complexion which matched his eyes and his shock of unruly hair. Later, upon looking more carefully, Steve discovered that the hair was not entirely gray; it had been ash blond to begin with.

Steve had never seen him before, but he knew who he was instantly.

"Mr. Gunnarson," he said, "what can I do for you?"

Perhaps he would not have recognized him so quickly if he had not been unintentionally reviewing in memory every feature and expression of Nels Gunnarson's daughter during the last half-hour. In this man was the same sober, steadfast expression of eye and mouth which characterized the girl. It broke into a smile the same way.

Nels Gunnarson showed no surprise at Steve's knowledge of his own identity. Perhaps he thought he was so great a celebrity in that town that everyone knew him. Certainly there was nothing furtive or apologetic about

his attitude toward the man whose privacy he had invaded uninvited.

Steve's outward actions gave no clue to the startled chill that was chasing up and down his backbone. He came into his room, unbuckled his belt, and threw it and the holstered pistol on the bed with apparent carelessness but actually with the gun nearer to himself than to his visitor and the butt turned his way.

Nels Gunnarson! First husband of Phoebe Dover, allegedly insane killer of Steve's own uncle, Rance Seeley; father of Joan, the girl who had that day very nearly inspired in Steve an emotion which he believed that feminine writers of a decade or two ago characterized as "hopeless passion." He realized now how very hopeless it really was, not only because he was a Seeley and she a Dover, but also because Joan, just as she had told Dr. Blaufus, could not rightfully be the wife of any man, not with the possibility of passing on a hereditary taint of mental instability to her children.

These thoughts chased one another in chaotic pinwheel circles through his mind for all the world like a stag party of tomcats celebrating the Easter holidays.

"You're the first person in town who has recognized me," said Gunnarson in a slow, gentle voice. "I've been away," he explained, "for fifteen years."

"Yes?" said Steve warily.

"I finally decided to come back. One or two things seem to be sort of coming to head along about now—thought maybe I'd better sit in."

"But why come to me?"

"I was getting to that. A woman by the name of Paulette Dubois, a mutual friend, I believe, told me I'd find you were about the best man to depend on in an emergency such as might be precipitated by my arrival."

"That," said Steve judicially, "is about as screwball

a notion as Paulette ever had, and she drips impractical ideas."

"Will it be all right if I come in?" It was Paulette's voice.

After she had spoken she knocked and then entered, not from the hall but by a connecting door from the adjoining room.

She was in pajamas and a lounging-robe, both apple green and quite nice, not a seductive outfit at all. How could Steve know that she had changed from a nightie since Gunnarson had entered the picture?

Steve looked at her with a scowl. "How did that door get unlocked?"

"I unlocked it. I've got claustrophobia, Steve, and, after all, this is the top floor of the tallest building in the city. I'm the same way in the upper stories of the Empire State in New York, just can't bear being locked in. I have to be able to get out—in all directions. As you can see, I'm to be pitied, not censured."

"All right, you unlocked my door so you could get out. And you're on your way out now. How do you want to go from here—via the outer door or the window?"

"You have no heart, Steve, nothing but a mothball in your chest." She sat down. "I want to hear what you two gentlemen are talking about without being obliged to strain my ears at that keyhole. Also I think I can help clear up one or two points that may bother you."

"Such as?"

"Such as why Nels Gunnarson should get within pistol range of the nephew of Rance Seeley."

"That, I think, would be a very fair place to begin explaining. It had puzzled me a little to dope out a reason why the man who shot my uncle should wish to converse with me."

"The reason, Steve, is that he didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't shoot Rance Seeley."

"He entered a plea of guilty to it fifteen years ago."

"No, he entered a plea of insanity. He had to do that or swing for something he didn't do."

During this Nels Gunnarson had not even tilted forward in his chair. Steve looked at his impassive face. He was apparently going to say nothing himself in defense or justification.

"If Gunnarson didn't shoot Rance Seeley, who did?"

"That's what he doesn't know."

"Damned if I see why he pleaded insanity if—"

"That was one of Phoebe's ideas."

"Oh, pure fiction, plot forty-seven, huh?"

"Well, it was the only way out."

"Except that it left his daughter with a blight on all the rest of her life."

"Unfortunately," Paulette continued, "it is not always the guilty who suffer the most. In this case 'the guilty' up to and including the present date hasn't suffered any punishment at all. Nels, here, thought it might be a good idea to put the bite on the proper party and by so doing free his daughter from the stigma of being related either to a murderer or a maniac. Neat, what?"

"Umph. If it can be done. Solving a mystery fifteen years old doesn't sound like a child's game of *I spy* to me."

"Anyway, Nels has taken the first step. He's here."

"And a damned slippery step that is. The minute his feet go out from under him the one who'll be there to pick him up will be the sheriff."

"You've forgotten," Paulette reminded Steve, "that the sheriff of Outlaw never really interferes with the Dovers and the Seeleys."

"And you've forgotten," Steve reminded her, "that Mr. Gunnarson is not really a Dover."

"No." Nels leaned forward, and his chair came down to the floor, but gently; he took the shock on his feet like a cat. "I have not forgotten that I am not a Dover. It was, I think, the Dovers who let me take the blame for what happened that long-ago day and then did not remember about me any more. I know Phoebe didn't. She was to wait for me." He laughed a little bitterly. "She wrote only one letter. But I guess that's all right. She was really in love with Rance, not me, all the time. She got a divorce as soon as she could and has been married twice since then; it will be three times tomorrow, if tomorrow comes."

"What do you mean, 'if tomorrow comes'?" Steve demanded.

It was Paulette who answered, a little too hastily, Steve thought, as if she were covering up a slip. "Nels is a poet; you know that, Steve. That was just a poet's way of saying, 'It's all on the knees of the gods,' or 'If I'm wrong, sue me' or something like that. You see how it is?"

"I can see that you two have framed something together. You're afraid to tell me the truth."

Steve was a little angry. Not too angry, because he liked Paulette, and she was making no plea for herself whatever. And, come to think of it, she hadn't been treated any too well either in that distant past which they were discussing, when Phoebe Dover had stolen Nels Gunnarson out from under her nose and married him just to spite another man. Paulette apparently still loved him, maybe not in just the same way. But she loved him—maternally, maybe. Anyway, she wanted someone to pay for the way Nels Gunnarson had been hurt and then forgotten. The forgetting was the worst part, Steve surmised. And Phoebe had ridden roughshod over both their hearts and not remembered even to be sorry. She was an imperious wench, Phoebe was,

and she thought the world was her blue-point. But eve a bivalve is bound to turn sometime.

Steve couldn't help liking Nels Gunnarson a little too He was so earnest and yet so very calm. That wasn't lik a neurotic or a pathological patient. And then, o course, he was so very much Joan's father. Separated b the many years' difference in their ages and by th inherent difference in their sexes, they were, neverthe less, essentially as much alike as identical twins. It wa the way they moved, the way they looked at you, th soft huskiness of speech. They both, heaven help them acted as if they expected the world to be kind. Someone Steve thought, ought to warn trustful people like tha to look out.

Nels Gunnarson repeated Steve's accusation. "You sa we are 'afraid to tell you the truth.' You are quite mis taken, Mr. Boyd, although I do not think I need t point that out to a man who reasons as clearly as you do. I have no intention of ever telling anything excep the truth to anyone. I told a lie many years ago in court, but that was not my own idea. I was young and bewildered and I did as I was told.

"I was a poet then—at least I wrote verse—things seemed beautiful to me, sometimes tragic, I admit, but always lovely. That has been burned out of my heart in fifteen years. I do not think I could compose even a quatrain of doggerel any more.

"Don't think that I'm bitter. Considering the circumstances, that is scarcely true at all. At least there is no sex anger connected with my emotions. I don't love Phoebe any more."

"You haven't seen her lately," Paulette pointed out.

"No, but Phoebe is not the kind of woman whom a man loves all his life. For a while he is consumed with a mad passion for her, and then one morning he wakes up and he does not even like her very well."

"I would doubt that," objected Paulette.

"You are not that kind of woman."

"I hope that's a compliment."

Nels smiled. "I am speaking from the point of view of a scientist; that's what I am now instead of a poet."

Steve was curious. "What kind of a scientist?"

"A psychiatrist. I have an education in various branches of mental processes, especially the abnormal ones, which is equal to that of most specialists in that field in this or any country."

Steve must have looked his incredulity. Gunnarson went on with his painstakingly explicit explanation:

"I studied it in the institution in which I was confined. The medical officers in charge knew that I was not mentally unbalanced; they discussed mental diseases with me because that was what they knew most about, and later they loaned me their books. I had so much time to study that finally I knew more about their own specialty than they did themselves."

"Wait just a minute," Steve interrupted. "If the medical officers in charge, or any one of them, knew that you were perfectly sane, as you claim, why did no one take steps to have you discharged?"

"For two reasons." Nels was as tolerantly patient as a Lincoln. "One was that they liked me. If I had been discharged I would have been executed. The other, which is really a related reason, is that someone who had considerable political power did not want me either released or executed."

"Meaning who by this person with political power?"

"No one specifically. By deduction it is to the interest of everyone in the Dover family to keep any representative of the clan, even an in-law, from the disgrace of being executed for merely exterminating a Seeley."

"I see," said Steve slowly.

"I told you," said Paulette to Nels, "that he's not

so dumb as that fellow in Los Angeles told you he was."

"What fellow in Los Angeles?" Steve demanded almost angrily.

"It must have been your managing editor, I suppose," replied Paulette sweetly. "He'd be the only one who'd be apt to know, wouldn't he?"

Steve muttered to himself. You couldn't actually do anything to a woman for laying verbal booby traps like that.

Nels came in with a continuation of his own thought: "Besides not wanting me executed on account of family pride, I've always thought that it was probably to the personal advantage of one particular Dover to have me permanently shut up in both senses of the word. He, whoever he is, may think I know more than I do."

"In that case," Steve pointed out, "your life is worth exactly peanuts as soon as it is known that you have returned to Outlaw."

"That's what I tell him," concurred Paulette, "and that's why I advised him to get you to take charge of the investigation for him. You have the advantage—"

There were footsteps on the wooden floor of the corridor outside. Nels Gunnarson heard them first and held up his hand for silence.

The footsteps might pass by.

But they stopped. There was a rap on the door.

"What is it?" asked Steve loudly.

"Mr. Boyd?" It was the reedy voice of the young night clerk.

"Yeah?"

"You're wanted on the telephone. It's down in the office."

There was no room phone. Steve confirmed that by a swift glance around the wall.

"All right. I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay. But the guy said to hurry. It's a long-distance call."

Chapter Fourteen: REMEMBERED FOLLY

As STEVE RATHER SHREWDLY SUSPECTED, the impatient party on the other end of the telephone was one Michael O'Connel, editor of the Los Angeles *Bulletin.*

"Were you taking your annual bath?" Mike asked.

"'Tain't funny, McGee!" Steve said. "But if you really want to know there is only one telephone in this entire hotel, and a traveling salesman was using it to tell his wife about a blonde he'd just met and—"

"Cut," broke in the editor. "This is serious. Do you think the operator on the telephone switchboard is listening in?"

"No, of course not. Listen, Mike, the cutie that operates the exchange at night is pure wool and a yard wide, anyway, thirty-four inches from hip to hip. I've got a date with her when she comes off duty and—"

"Sir," said a severe feminine voice, "I don't even know who you are."

"You see, chief?" said Steve. "That's how it is."

"Okay, then. International Morse." There was silence at the other end, followed by a series of taps and pauses, telegraph code.

Steve could read it fast enough so that he only had to take a few notes.

The message was: *A.P. wire service reports Nels Gunnarson escaped institution for criminally insane last night after making threats against the family of his ex-wife who is to be married tomorrow.*

The editor's voice followed. "Did you get that?"

"Yep. I've got an angle on it here that—"

"Hold it until later. It's all in your lap, dearie."

"So I noticed. What do I do—issue storm warnings?"

"I think so. Otherwise we might be accessories before the fact, wouldn't we?"

"I'm no lawyer. But I'll take steps."

"Thanks. If you're too late shoot the story in time for the newsstand edition."

"Nice idea, Mr. Karloff."

"Get at it. Good night!"

Almost as soon as Steve had hung up the telephone rang again. The night clerk who answered it called Steve back. He was halfway up the first flight of stairs.

"It's for you again, Mr. Boyd."

He went back. "Hello."

"This is Scott Seeley," a deep voice replied. "I'm over puttin' the Outlaw *Post* to bed."

"Yeah?"

"What I want to know is is this true about Gunnarson escaping from—"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, I guess I should have explained. The city telephone switchboard is right here in the newspaper office, and Sadie, the night operator, sets type for me between calls. She's a telegraph operator, too, not any too fast on International, but she can read it."

Steve started to laugh. Why not? It amused him to think how quickly and simply Wiseguy Michael O'Connel's elaborate secrecy had been punctured.

"Have you got any kind of a cork that fits Sadie and keeps her from spilling?"

"I could keep her in the lavatory until somebody has to use it."

"Do that, will you?—at least until I can locate the prospective corpse in this murder case. And, Scott—"

"What?"

"As one Seeley to another, keep it out of your own sheet, will you, unless I tell you to run it?"

"Right, my lad. I'll have it all set, though, and hold

the press until daylight. 'By!"

"'By, yourself."

Steve was once more on his way up the stairs.

"Mr. Boyd!"

"Yuh?"

"Who's this prospective corpse you're talkin' about?" The young clerk just had to know.

"You, my little Missouri canary, provided, of course, we can find a coffin large enough to tuck in those long ears of yours."

Steve went up the two flights of stairs rather faster than he had come down a few minutes earlier. He had no plan as yet, but it seemed like a good idea to corral Nels Gunnarson as a preliminary step while he did a little thinking.

The only trouble was that when he opened the door of his room there was nobody inside.

The cartridge belt lay on the bed where he had left it.

But his revolver was not in it. He picked up the belt. The gun wasn't hidden under it either.

Fifteen or twenty seconds later Steve discovered that the door leading to Paulette's room was locked.

His room key did not fit it.

Steve put his ear to the panel. He thought he heard a low laugh.

He rapped sharply on the door. Not that he expected any response. There wasn't any.

There didn't seem to be much sense in remaining in his room. Steve started down the corridor. He came back and tried his key in Paulette's outside door.

It worked perfectly.

But there was no one there either.

Paulette's pajamas and the robe that she had worn to call on him a few moments before were on the bed. The hussy had doubtless changed costume shamelessly in front of Gunnarson. Well, why not? She had been

engaged to him once. Or didn't that constitute grounds for familiarity?

As Steve hurried down the stairs he looked for a place to throw the cartridge belt and empty holster which he had so far been carrying in his hand. There was no wastebasket or empty receptacle anywhere, so he put the belt around his waist.

At the hotel desk he paused to ask, "Did a man and woman just come downstairs?"

The young clerk turned to look at him. "I don't know, mister. I was scratching one of my long ears."

"I apologize. This is serious."

"Okay. The dame in number thirty-two came down with that man who was waitin' for you when you came in."

"Thanks. I'll get you a Junior G-Man badge for helping. Which way did they go?"

"I didn't notice."

"Darn it. I'll have to make it a tin star with 'Girl Scout' printed on it in raised letters."

"That's all right. I can't read, anyhow."

Outside the hotel Steve looked up and down the street. There were more people around than he expected. The picture show was letting out. No use to look for Paulette and Gunnarson in that haystack. They wouldn't stick to the main street, anyhow.

He got into his car, which was parked, in the convenient fashion of Western towns, right in front of the hotel.

Steve thought he still had a shade of advantage over anyone else looking for Phoebe Dover. He knew where she was.

When he arrived at the dance hall, a large barnlike structure adjoining the rodeo arena, Phoebe was doing something pretty startling in the way of a rhumba with Albany, the mysterious foreman of the Ring-Bar-X.

There was no question but that the lad could step. Maybe that was what they had hired him for. Somebody had imported a good orchestra, so the dancers had something substantial in the way of a rhythmic beat to lean against. Everybody else was watching Phoebe and Albany. The rhumba was too complicated for the home talent.

Phoebe and Albany were well worth watching, and Steve paused a moment himself.

Albany wore probably the fanciest cowboy outfit ever seen west of a Broadway musical show. A silk shirt, silk sash, and a sombrero that owed allegiance to Mexico and not the Stetson Hat Company made him resemble the Cisco Kid in one of his more ornate moments.

And Phoebe, who might have gone Mexican, too, with a comb in her hair and a lace mantilla, had chosen to do nothing of the kind. To Steve's untrained masculine eye she looked practically almost demure in a long, full evening gown of an odd coral color which ended just under her arms and didn't go any farther north, even to the extent of straps. The dress stayed on, anyway, doubtless buoyed up by faith and a little whalebone. Her complexion above the Plimsoll line was very good, or she couldn't have worn the dress. The muscles of the neck were, according to astronomical calculations, about due to assert themselves, but not yet, thanks probably to a Swedish masseuse or a Parisian masseur.

Phoebe carried her head back and was smiling up into Albany's face in a tantalizing way that doubtless made him feel that Casanova (if he'd ever heard of him) was just a sailor off an oyster boat.

Joan was standing ringside with the rest of the spectators. Jimmie Baxter was unobtrusively furnishing a background for the fairy-princess costume.

Steve wanted to lead Joan out onto the floor and have a whirl at that music himself. But he didn't think he

had time for anything so frivolous.

Instead he waited for the band to finish the number and then went directly to Phoebe Dover before anyone could start an encore.

"May I—?" he started to say.

"One side," said Albany belligerently.

"No, no, Bosco," Phoebe said, restraining him. *What a hell of a nickname,* Steve thought. "Mr. Boyd is a friend of mine."

"He's a Seeley."

"Why, so he is, Bosco." Steve thought that she was probably often sarcastic with the down-East cowpuncher. He was an easy target for it. "I suppose it's his very Seeleyishness that interests me. A writer has to know about all kinds. The Seeleys have always been brave men. This one doesn't seem to be afraid of me—or of you. So run along, Bosco; the next dance is going to be for grownups."

If dancing was the only way he could get a word in private with Phoebe, Steve was grimly game to go through with it. No rhumba though. He wanted to talk, not follow an intricate pattern.

Fortunately the orchestra broke into a "sweet" waltz. Steve could do that with his eyes shut and his mind in Baffin Bay. So they floated away, leaving Albany under a dark cloud which was probably just condensed profanity and vengeful thoughts.

"The young man concealed his friendship for me very effectively," Steve said.

"Yes," Phoebe admitted. "I don't know where he got the idea that he has any proprietary rights over me. After all, I am to be married to someone else tomorrow."

That made Steve remember sharply Nels Gunnarson's cryptically menacing remark: "if tomorrow comes."

This was no time to be dancing even with a woman as interesting as Phoebe Dover.

He might as well break the bad news and get it over with. "Nels Gunnarson is in town," he said with brutal directness.

No muscles in her flawless body moved except in the rhythm of the dance, and her step did not perceptibly falter, but Steve felt the impact of his statement just the same. It was like the jolt of two thousand volts.

Then there was silence for a dozen beats of the drum.

"It is," she said finally, "a free country."

"Not for Gunnarson," he reminded her. "Nor," he added, "entirely for you. A press dispatch says that he escaped principally to settle scores with the Dover family."

"Specifically with me?" she asked. She was brave. There was no tremor in her voice.

"I would think so. The actions of the others didn't mean much to him."

"How do you know all this?"

Steve told her briefly about meeting Gunnarson in the hotel. It did not seem necessary to drag Paulette into it. He couldn't quite figure where she belonged anyway.

"What," she asked, "do you suggest that I do?"

"I don't think," he said dryly, "that if I were you I would take the advice of a Seeley in a life-and-death matter like this. After all, I *am* a Seeley, as your young friend reminded you."

She caught the smile with which he said it. "Yes, I know. But you don't work at it all the time. Besides, your uncle Rance was a Seeley too. He died for me."

"I think you exaggerate. He died for himself. But never mind the technicalities. If you really want my advice, I think that first of all you ought to find some place not quite so brightly lighted as this. In other words, get the hell out of here."

"I believe," she agreed, "that, adopting your use of

the vernacular, I may say that now you're cooking with gas, Mister. Come on."

She took his hand and led him off the floor. Steve had not intended to go anywhere with Phoebe, but when she said, "Take me home!" he did not attempt to evade the issue. One somehow didn't argue with Phoebe Dover. People who preferred not to do as she wished had to keep out of her way and hope for the best.

As they left the dance floor Steve encountered the glances of the tall young ranch foreman and of Phoebe's daughter. The expression on the face of the latter was puzzled and slightly reproachful. The foreman was openly hostile.

"What," demanded Steve mildly as they hurried away, "should make that immature veal wrassler act as if he was jealous?"

"The reason the tenderfoot toreador acts jealous is because he *is* jealous. I promised to spend this last evening of my widowhood with him, and he probably thinks I am ditching him for a handsomer man. Is *this* your car?"

Steve handed her in and turned the ignition key on the dash of his coupé. But when he reached for the starter with his foot his spurs got caught in the floor mat. He had forgotten he was wearing them.

"Damn!" he said.

"Albany always turns his foot sideways," advised Phoebe, who saw the difficulty.

The starter worked that way. Steve deduced that Phoebe and Albany had done a good deal of riding around in automobiles lately. A literary woman, Steve decided cynically, must have to spend a lot of time on more or less serious flirtations, keeping in practice for writing romantic stories.

"Sometime," Steve said, carrying on his thought, "you'll have to begin making up your love scenes from

memory."

"No gentleman would say a thing like that," Phoebe declared with mock indignation. "However, you're wrong even if tactless. When I'm too old to totter out to meet an interesting man and find out how his heart works then I'll have my daughter to act as spy for me."

"I don't think she will though."

"I don't think so either," Phoebe conceded. "She's a very nice person, Joan is. God played her a dirty trick in making me her mother. I'm a tramp, looking for an easy handout from life, but I rather think she is a lady, although I can't force her to admit it."

"You don't make any alibis for yourself, do you?" Steve remarked upon the trait for which he really admired her.

"No, but that's probably not a virtue in anyone who doesn't care."

They were out of the grounds and at the junction with the road which led to Outlaw. To Steve it seemed that to go through town was the worst route they could choose, and he headed automatically in the other direction.

"The Dover ranch is out this way somewhere, isn't it?" he said.

"No," replied Phoebe. "You really are a stranger in these parts, aren't you? Imagine a Seeley not knowing where the stronghold of the enemy is."

Steve indicated a side road, or rather, a sort of trail. "This afternoon I saw your brother Hank riding up the canyon that this leads into. I thought he was heading for home."

"He was, but that's the old trail that was used before the highway came through. The boys still take it sometimes when they're afoot or on horseback. But you can't navigate a car on the floor of the canyon, too many rocks. There are some mine workings up there, but they

were old and abandoned even before I was born. When we were children, Hank and I used to play there sometimes, but not often; it was a little scary. The road we use now is on the other side of town. But drive on past the canyon trail in the direction you're heading. There's an Indian trading-post up ahead about twenty miles. I think I'd rather ride a ways than go home. It's pleasant and cool."

"And safer," Steve added.

"That is something I wasn't thinking about."

"You'd better."

Phoebe laughed. "For whose sake? Not Joan's. She would get on as well or better without me. Not for the sake of my affianced husband. I've never made a man happy yet. And not for my public. All I do is keep newer and better writers out of the magazines because the stories I make up are sensational tripe. No, let's not go prowling up this road for the sake of safety. That would be too dull. I dislike dullness."

That, Steve thought, was something she scarcely needed to point out. Her life proved it.

"Besides," Phoebe went on, "I haven't the least idea that I'm in any danger from Nels. Unless he's changed greatly he is not the sort of man who could possibly take the life of another person."

Phoebe was the second woman who had made that statement during the evening. It was absurd on the face of it.

Steve said so and added, "He killed Rance Seeley."

"No," said Phoebe slowly, "I don't believe he did. He only said he did."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"I asked him to. Nels was very much in love with me. I'm telling you this because I think you ought to have the complete picture. There may be an argument come up about some of these things, and you might be

the only one able to keep his head screwed on the right way."

Steve thought he was a peculiar person to be in possession of Dover family secrets and said so.

She explained. "Perhaps you are. But, you see, I should have married Rance. That would make me your aunt."

"All right," said Steve with a short laugh. "Don't let's get into that or I'll be really mixed up."

"Did your mother ever tell you anything about my wedding and what happened just before it?"

"No. She was an Arizona girl all right and taught me to ride and rope and things like that—until I got better at it than she was—but naturally she didn't talk much about family affairs back here. She left the state to get away from all the hate and violence that was going on, and she seldom spoke of people who lived in Outlaw. I don't even rightly know much about my uncle Rance."

"He would only be ten or twelve years older than you are yourself," Phoebe reminisced. "Look at that moon; it's a harvest moon, I guess, like in the song. More color to it out here than anywhere else at this time of year, on account of the red September dust. That's the way Rance used to explain it.

"Once we knew all about the way the nights looked in this country, your uncle Rance and I. We'd meet late, sometimes after midnight, just to see each other for a few minutes. My father wouldn't let him come to call on me in the regular way. He was a fanatic, Father was, especially about me. You heard what Paulette said this afternoon. I was the only girl in the family, and Father thought I was some kind of a princess, does yet, in spite of all that the newspapers have said about me.

"Back in the old days he used to take me to the dances hereabouts himself, just to make sure I didn't have

anything to do with the wrong people."

"Meaning us Seeleys?"

"If you think the shoes fit you can have 'em. Father didn't know that after he and I came home and I had gone to my room there would be your uncle Rance, sitting on the roof of the shed just outside my window. I'd lean out and, oh, my dear, his lips were young and sweet. He was nice, Rance was, strong and hot blooded and all that, but he never came through my open window—never. And I'm afraid I would have let him.

"But never mind that. It is enough to say that there was warm moonlight in those days—not the kind we have now which is only a pale, chill ghost that cannot quite remember."

Steve was silent. If she would, he wanted her to go on, but he was not inclined to urge.

Phoebe did continue. "Nels Gunnarson came here from the East, Columbia University. He was rather frail, tall, but bony. The doctors back there thought he had a touch of t.b. This used to be one of the places to send lungers. It turned out he was all right, but we didn't know that at first.

"He interested me naturally because he was already a writer, and I wanted to be one. I spent a lot of time literally pumping him dry of everything he knew.

"Rance, damn fool that he was, misunderstood. I tried to explain it to him, but nobody ever understands a writer. Why should they? Rance went away. Honest! It was just like the silly old plays where the whole tragic plot hinged on the fact that the hero overheard only part of a speech by the heroine. If he'd only listened a second longer there wouldn't have been any play. I was so frantic I ran away myself and tried to find him but I couldn't. No one knew where he was. We were just kids; he was eighteen and I was seventeen. Father sent detectives after me and had me brought

back home. Later, when Nels proposed in a nice old-world fashion, Father, for the first time in his life, seemed to think that there was a man suitable to be my husband.

"The terrible thing I did was to marry Nels without loving him, while I was really caring with all my little white heart for someone else. Worse yet, I kept on caring even after Joan was born. Rance came back in six or seven years, thinking it would be all right. But it wasn't. We both knew it the minute we met, accidentally, of course, in front of the post office in Outlaw.

"I doubt very much if you will understand what I mean when I tell you that every once in a while two people who have been searching for centuries finally find each other in one of their cycles on earth—you know, the sort of thing you hear about at Sunday-night lectures in badly ventilated halls. I don't really believe any of it myself. And yet the sight of Rance threw everything else in my life into vague shadow. I had to step up into the blinding light beside him. It didn't seem to matter who might get hurt.

"I knew we must meet some place where the telescopic eyes of all the town would not be focused on us. I told myself that it was because I had to explain to him how I had waited, how I had tried to find him. That wasn't true. I had to see him because he was Rance Seeley, because his hair had a tiny little wave in it, like yours, with a sprinkling of gray—even at twenty-three that had come there, I knew, from wanting me and from remembering how I'd leaned from my window in the moonlight—because there was a funny hurt look about his hard mouth and because his voice wakened echoes that had been only lightly sleeping in my heart.

"It was I who asked him to see me and it was I who insisted that he climb to my window once again that night instead of calling on me and Nels as he wanted

to do. It was really I, my dear, who killed him, not the man who fired the shot."

Her voice trailed away. The moon had scurried behind a cloud. It seemed for a moment colder.

"And now," she said in an entirely different tone, "we are coming to the Indian trading-post I spoke about."

Sure enough, desolately picturesque in the intermittent moonlight, there loomed up ahead at the right of the road a partly ruined adobe building with a high, walled corral attached.

"It used to be a transcontinental stagecoach stop," Phoebe explained, still in the manner of the conventional guide. "If you like I'll tell you the story of how your great-grandfather and my grandfather stood shoulder to shoulder behind that wall there and fought off a hundred Apaches."

"Did they?"

"I don't know. I only agreed to furnish the story, not to prove it. It might be so. They were friends, you know, when they first came West together."

"That's news to me. I supposed that Dovers and Seeleys, even right fresh from the cradle, always bit each other whenever they met." Steve waved a hand at the dark building wrapped in its somber mantle of a dead past. "This bar seems to have closed for the night. I was intending to buy you a vanilla frappé."

Phoebe shrugged her shoulders. They looked very white in the luminous dark. "Oh, well," she said, "I can get along without one for a while, at least as long as I live. But you can turn your bit of mechanical jewelry around now and we'll go home. This road, if we follow it far enough in the other direction, will get us there. I'll have one of the Chink boys mix us some lime juice and lightning."

When they passed the rodeo grounds the dance was

apparently still in progress. There was music and a lot of light.

But not long after they had passed the entrance a dozen headlights or so turned out from the parking-space and followed them.

"Did somebody see us?" Steve asked.

"Oh, no. Those are just people on their way home from the dance. Most of them will stop at the ranch—all the Dovers anyway, and that includes half the countryside. After dances a couple of our roundup cooks serve coffee and a snack either in the bunkhouse or out on what we flatteringly call the front lawn when it's warm as it is tonight. Everybody's invited, but this'll be the first time a Seeley ever came."

"If you mean me," said Steve, "I'm coming and going. I've no intention of being the cause of any more trouble tonight. If it's all right with you I'll step on the button and get there ahead of the others with a little time to spare."

"It's all right with me," Phoebe assured him. "I didn't know your streamlined tumbleweed could travel any faster. Let's go."

In twenty minutes or so Phoebe slowed him down with her fingers on his arm. "This is where we turn off from the public highway."

There was a long cattle guard between bright new wire fences. Steve turned and drove the car over the rattling iron pipes which animals with hoofs are afraid to cross.

Chapter Fifteen: IN THE ENEMY STRONGHOLD

THE DRIVE TO THE RANCH HOUSE, even after leaving the highway, was several miles. Steve could not see the buildings and corrals from where they turned off. Eventually, however, around a turn in the natural road,

shielded by a windbreak of cottonwoods, a cluster of twinkling lights came into sight.

"The Ring-Bar-X covers a lot of territory," Steve observed. "I didn't know there was a ranch of this size around here."

"There wasn't until I began making enough money out of writing to buy up the adjoining properties." Phoebe did not tell it boastingly. She merely stated a fact. "I suppose you might call it a hobby, or maybe I wanted to make the dream I've seen in my father's eyes come true. And then again, perhaps it was just sheer cussedness and a desire to outshine anything you Seeleys could do. The land we crossed from the highway to the last turn in the trail used to belong to your grandfather. And, boy, did he hate to have it become part of the Ring-Bar-X when the bank foreclosed on it. We, I might mention, own the bank. Nobody knew that at the time. But it was a profitless triumph. The more land you own around here the sooner you're doomed to bankruptcy. But until I die or lose my gift for telling the women of America about love, the Ring-Bar-X will wear a false look of prosperity which will be the envy of all the old-timers, especially you Seeleys."

"You talk," said Steve, "like a little girl trying to make a playmate mad."

"That's right. I'd almost forgotten you aren't Rance. You don't care what I say; he did."

The two-story, many-winged 'dobe ranch house was just ahead. It was quite easy to make out the detail of the huge structure, because there were four large floodlights on high poles which illuminated the surrounding service yard.

"This place is lit up like Broadway," Steve commented. "All you need is a few neon signs and a fruit-juice bar. Where do you get your electric power? You're quite a ways from town."

"We have our own system. If you listen you can hear the gasoline motor that drives it; it's a hit-and-miss single-cylinder engine."

Steve did listen idly. Phoebe was right. A powerful motor could be heard whanging away occasionally at irregular intervals even above the noise of his own car.

Phoebe was continuing. "It's old-fashioned, but we make no apologies for it because it always works. Some of the newer silent outfits expire just when you need them most."

"But can anybody sleep with that thing exploding every two or three seconds?"

"It doesn't run when we go to bed. Besides, you get used to it. Father, of course, who turns in early, can't hear it."

Phoebe was wrong about her father turning in early that night. When Steve, by her invitation, followed the daughter of the house into the huge main room of the ranch house, the old man, whom he had seen earlier in the day on the way to the rodeo, was sitting in a rocking-chair with a dark shawl across his knees. The shawl was a strange article of apparel for a grizzled rancher to be using, especially on a hot September night.

Phoebe gave a slight gasp when she saw her father. She explained her reaction to Steve. "He's sitting up, waiting for me to come in, just the way he used to. It gave me a start."

The old man rose a little unsteadily. He seemed almighty tall and menacing in spite of his frail shoulders.

The shawl dropped to his feet, unnoticed, as he pointed a trembling finger at Steve.

"Rance Seeley," he said, and he spoke as with the voice of a prophet, "I've told you never to enter that door as long as you lived."

Phoebe hastened to his side.

"This isn't Rance, Father," she explained. "Rance

is dead; don't you remember?" She shook her head despairingly. "He doesn't hear me unless he looks straight at me so he can read my lips. And now he keeps his eyes on you."

"I'll go," said Steve.

Dover heard that all right. "It's lucky I knew you wasn't packin' a gun or you wouldn't have a chance to leave. Us Dovers don't shoot unarmed men—even Seeleys. Here's the one that woman left for you."

He reached into his pocket and took out a revolver. He tossed it contemptuously toward Steve, who caught it butt first. It was just another of the tricks he had learned working around the movies. Steve was a little ashamed of seeming to show off.

"Now," continued the old man, "you've got an iron on you. If you're inside the ranch fence ten minutes from now you'll have to shoot your way out. I've told the boys in the bunkhouse. They're out ridin' the wire, waitin' for you."

Steve would have taken all that to be merely the raving of a man who had dwelt too long in the halls of hate until at last his mind had warped.

Except for the fact that the revolver which he had just picked out of the air was his own six-gun that he had last seen lying on the bed in his room at the hotel in Outlaw.

Chapter Sixteen: LAST INSTALLMENT

THE PRESENCE OF THAT REVOLVER at the Dover ranch and in the possession of Phoebe's father required some explaining. Steve didn't even need to look at the revolver to know that it was really his own. He could tell by the balance of it, the way it fitted his hand. But how had it come back to him?

"That woman," as Mr. Dover referred to the person

who had given him the gun, might very probably be Paulette. There was no other woman who knew about his revolver so far as Steve knew. But if she had taken the weapon from its holster in the first place why was she returning it in this peculiar and roundabout fashion?

And how and why had she come to the ranch?

To warn Phoebe about Nels? Steve didn't know.

He wasn't even sure Paulette would be on Phoebe's side against Nels Gunnarson.

Where was she now?

Steve found that he could ask himself unanswerable questions until he was entirely dizzy. Maybe his head would work better outside.

He dropped his revolver into the holster on his belt and turned to go through the door he had just entered, a perfectly normal, seasonable screen door with a ball on a string at the top which was supposed to keep it from slamming.

The door was scarcely visible. There was too much of Hank Dover in front of it, Hank Dover with a gun in his right hand and a chew of plug tobacco in his left cheek. They sort of balanced each other.

"Reach!" said Hank laconically.

It was the first time Hank had really had the drop on Steve, and he was enjoying it.

Only for a second though.

"Don't be silly, Henry," declared Phoebe a little impatiently.

Steve was actually raising his hands when she spoke. He thought that he had better do as he was told, or else Hank would really shoot. Hank had a lot of marks on his face, blue, black, and mouse-colored, which Steve suspected he was responsible for, and he couldn't really blame Hank for wanting to square accounts. But from a wavering look in Hank's eye Steve judged that it

would be safe to lower his hands.

"What," demanded Hank truculently of his sister, "is this skunk doin' on our property?"

Phoebe looked at him coldly. "Did you say 'our property'? Go look at the title deeds."

"Don't rub it in," growled her brother.

"Then don't you act like a drunken half-breed. If you want to play cowboys and Indians go find some of the other small boys. Mr. Boyd came here to warn me of a very serious danger."

"He didn't come here; he came to the dance hall a couple of hours ago," muttered Hank.

Steve almost had to laugh; the great hulking tobacco chewer really was very much like a little boy. He was ten years older than Phoebe, and yet she treated him as if she were his mother. Or maybe more like a stepmother.

"You certainly keep good track of me—and Mr. Boyd," Phoebe said.

"Albany told me."

"I knew that, of course."

"What's all this danger your friend came to warn you about?"

"I'll tell you while you're helping me get Father to his room."

Phoebe took John Dover's right arm, and Hank moved around to the left side.

"Good night then," said Steve. "I'll go back to town."

"No, please wait," Phoebe requested. "I really want you to."

"He'd be afraid," Hank said. "With all the gang comin' for coffee. Some o' the boys are high and—"

"I'll wait," said Steve—well, not really Steve, but some of the Seeley blood that was controlling his vocal chords for the moment.

"Thanks," said Phoebe. "You'll find it pleasant out on the veranda."

Steve did not reply, but he really went outside this time.

A hoarse, reedy laugh followed him. It was John Dover. "You told him, Hank," he jeered.

The old man apparently hadn't heard a word of the conversation.

Outside Steve stood a moment thinking over what he had better do. Everything but the afore-mentioned Seeley blood in him said that there was still time for a swift retreat to his car and a hasty flight in it back to the comparative friendliness of the village.

That was what he didn't do.

From the veranda there was an unobstructed view of countryside which probably reached for miles in the clear daylight of the Arizona plateau. As it was, even at night, with star sparklers above and a moon blown huge as it began to set over the western mountains, the ranch house seemed an impudent dot of time in a splendid isolation of eternity. Out there once Apaches had danced their war dances; signal fires had risen against the darkness, and it was savage yells which had shattered the primeval silence, not the *bang-phut-phut-phut* of a hit-and-miss motor. Before that, prehistoric monsters had fought their titanic, senseless battles amid the rocks left by the receding glaciers. And before that—the ooze and steaming mist of creation.

The headlights of the cars which had been following them from the dance were just turning off the highway onto the ranch drive. It would be several minutes before they arrived even yet. A good plan if he wanted to duck any possible trouble would be to head back to town after the last of the Dover cars had come in and parked. He didn't think he would do that, but it was still a good plan, even if he changed his mind.

Steve sat down to wait in one of the rocking-chairs. There were a dozen of them on the huge veranda,

besides a couple of swing seats.

The chair he had chosen squeaked. Steve got out of it and moved toward the end of the porch to find another. He had almost seated himself before he noticed that the rocker he had selected was already occupied.

"I beg your pardon," Steve ejaculated, startled.

"It's okay, pal. I was half asleep or I would of spoke."

"Oh, it's you."

"Yeah, me. Soso."

"Where's Skippy?"

"He's wonderin' around somewheres. I told him it was foolish to fly in the face of improvidence like we're doin', but Skippy's got half a snootful, and I got to handle him with mittens when he's that way."

"Does anybody in the house know you're here?"

"I don't think Skip mentioned it to nobody when we first got here. He thinks he's still this dame's husband until sometime tomorrow and, as such, he says he's got the rights to go and come as much as he likes—congenital rights, he calls 'em."

"Don't you mean conjugal?"

"Mebbe. Whichever it is it makes him mad to think of some other man in his half o' the martial bed, which is his name for the coil springs after you're married."

If the situation had not carried with it the element of tragedy and the portent of danger Steve would have had to laugh at the idea of the husbands and lovers of Phoebe Dover wandering around the Ring-Bar-X. Nels Gunnarson would be almost certain to look in sometime in the near future, Skippy McGinn was already on the premises, and Albany, the range boss, lived at the ranch. There might be others who had not declared themselves yet, as well as Phoebe Dover's second husband, whom no one had mentioned so far, and also the affianced bridegroom who was to take over as of tomorrow. Even

he might have arrived a day early to survey the scene incognito.

If any two of the gentlemen who had real or fancied rights should bump into each other it seemed likely that there would be a blinding flash of spontaneous combustion and—a pinch of ashes.

Steve, as a mere spectator, marveled again at the power over the opposite sex of a woman who did not care.

There seemed little to chat about with Soso. Therefore they wrapped themselves in their own gloomy thoughts and waited. For what neither of them exactly knew.

The headlights of the home-coming automobiles had turned past the cottonwood windbreak and were approaching the house when Phoebe opened the screen door of the living-room and spoke Steve's name.

He got up and went toward her.

"Hank is taking care of the more intimate details of putting Father to bed," she said, "and I've ordered some ice and seltzer. If you can spare the time I'd like to talk with you a little longer. Would you mind coming upstairs to my 'office,' as they call the place where I work? We won't be bothered there."

Steve had nothing else to do and, besides, he was interested. "I'd appreciate seeing your layout. Like all writing people, even newspaper men such as myself, I have an idea of the ideal shop where I'd like to turn out the Great American Novel."

They were climbing the staircase. "Don't worry about a place to write *that* book. It will probably be done on a shovel by the light of a fireplace by someone lying uncomfortably on his stomach, like the picture of Abraham Lincoln. But if you want to see a really convenient factory for turning out tripe such as I write, this is it."

She opened a heavy door at the head of the stairs and turned an electric switch in the wall. "This, young man, *is* the Ring-Bar-X ranch. The cattle run the range at a loss. There isn't any oil on the property; we've looked. You can't raise a really good crop of loco weed in this soil. But this shaft leads to a vein of virgin gold, and as long as I'm alive to operate the pick and shovel the Dovers will live on love—or whatever kind of stories the editors happen to be buying for their feminine readers."

The room was long, but not so long as to look narrow. The walls were knotty pine, and there was a fireplace. So far it was like the photographs you see in the Home magazines.

The rest was different.

At one end, away from the door, was a bank of casement windows without drapes. Overhead was a skylight with a series of narrow shutters, like the slats in Venetian blinds. These were mechanically controlled to admit a lot of light or none at all, as desired. Phoebe demonstrated that as she explained: "I sleep here when I'm really working." She pointed to a day bed. "At other times my quarters are off there beyond that door, which opens into a connecting bath."

Near the windows was a huge pine table, about three times the size of an ordinary executive's desk. On it was everything that anybody could think of as being needed for writing—pens, pencils, an electric sharpener for the latter, dictionaries in several languages, a typewriter, stacks of paper, mailing-envelopes, one of them stamped and addressed, blotters, a bouquet of flowers in a vase, a desk lamp, shears, a paper cutter, a small radio, and alongside the desk chair a dictaphone in a special cabinet. That desk, desk chair, one other small chair, and the day bed were all the movable furniture. There were some built-in bookcases, but not enough. Books stood in piles all around the room.

Phoebe led him first to the casement windows at the far end of the room. "The workshop is really two rooms thrown together. This part used to be my bedroom when I was a youngster. The windows were just farm windows then—frame affairs with six panes to a sash—but they were in the same places. This"—she placed her hand on one which was closed—"is where your uncle used to wait for me. I leave the screen off from it even now—in case—" She opened the window and looked out onto a sloping roof which apparently covered a one-story extension of the same wing.

Steve, like most men, disliked sentimentality. "Why," he asked, "do you keep on living here where memories must hurt?"

Phoebe laughed. "Steve, I'm at least two-thirds fraud in this matter of a sad past. It's part of my literary stock in trade. I suppose that the principal reason why I live here at the homestead is on account of my father. I've told you that he thinks my feet tread consecrated ground, haven't I? The way I figure it, he spoiled me when I was a youngster, so it's only right that I should spoil him now that he's an old man."

She leaned out of her unscreened window and waved her hand with a handkerchief in it.

"That's my good night to him," she explained. "He never gets into bed until I've done it. That one lighted window you see in the wing which is parallel to this one is his room. He says he can go to sleep better if he is where he can see the light that shines from my window."

The illuminated window toward which she had pointed became suddenly black.

"I guess," Phoebe mused, "that Hank has finally got him quieted down. It was strange his mistaking you for Rance tonight. I wonder if his eyesight is failing, as well as his hearing."

To Steve it seemed more logical to suspect that maybe

the old gentleman's mind needed an entirely new set of gears, but he thought that perhaps Phoebe might be a little sensitive on the subject of mental derangement so he did not speak his thoughts.

While they were still standing at the open window the banging of the electric-light motor was supplemented by the noisy arrival of the Dover cavalcade of automobiles, some of which had apparently lost their mufflers. Mercifully they all got there in one group. After that there was a murmur of gay conversation and laughter in the air but, always excepting the stationary engine, no more violent noises.

A light came on in the room adjoining the one which Phoebe had said was her father's.

"Hank sleeps there where he can hear if Father should call out in the night. It's strange, isn't it?—Hank is really the one who does everything for him, and yet Father barely tolerates Hank and worships me with a devotion which is distinctly uncomfortable. It just shows that there's no percentage in being an angel."

"Like Hank, you mean," Steve inquired, "complete with whiskers and eating-tobacco?"

Phoebe laughed. "Hank is all right. You've got to be a Dover though to appreciate his good qualities." She turned away from the window. "Now we'll have that drink and a cigarette."

There was a bowl of ice, two glasses, and two bottles, one of them charged water, on his hostess's desk. Steve had not heard the servant bring them in. The help apparently wore Chinese felt slippers.

Phoebe went automatically to her desk chair, which left Steve the other rather cramped, spindly-legged affair which was opposite.

Phoebe noted the trouble he was having getting settled and laughed. "I keep an uncomfortable seat there on purpose, so no one will stay long when I'm busy. But

you may have my own chair because you are an honored guest."

Steve demurred, and they eventually remained as they were. She poured herself a drink of straight whisky and let Steve make himself a highball. He lit a cigarette for her and rolled one of his own.

Phoebe gulped down her drink without a chaser and picked up the large, flat manuscript envelope which lay on her desk already addressed but not sealed.

"This is the last installment of my new story," she said. "I skipped supper and completed it before I went in to town for the dance. I thought that would be safer than leaving it until tomorrow, as I originally intended."

As she spoke she had been reaching for a small package which was leaning conspicuously against an inkwell. The package was wrapped in white paper and tied with green string.

"Pardon me a moment while I open this."

She broke the string. There was a small square cardboard box inside.

"It's a prescription," Phoebe said, "that my brother got filled for me this morning. I'm lost without it." In the opened box between two layers of cotton lay a dozen or perhaps two dozen small white tablets. "These are sedative tablets which my doctor has me use to slow down a fast heart. Without them I can't sleep after a hard day. I'll take one now, because they don't begin to have any effect for an hour or so."

"Shall I get you some plain water?" Steve asked, indicating the bathroom.

"No, thanks," she said as she put one on her tongue; "they're tasteless." Her expression changed a little. "At least they always have been before. But never mind; it's down now."

During their trip upstairs, and ever since, Steve had been wondering whether or not he should tell her that

Skippy was prowling around outside somewhere. He decided that he ought to.

Phoebe was not much moved by the news except to cynical laughter.

"That's funny, isn't it? Nels and Skippy. And tomorrow I'm to be married to still another man. He won't turn out to be Rance either, not any more than Nels or Skippy did. There was another chap, too, that you don't know about. I've almost forgotten him myself. His name was Matthews, my second husband, a tramp like myself. Married me because I was earning a good living." She yawned. "Say, do you know I'm beginning to feel sleepy already? That stuff never acted so fast before. Must be stronger than the last batch, or else I'm tired from dancing."

Steve started to his feet. "You go to bed and I'll—"

She motioned him to be seated. "I'd rather you didn't go for a moment."

An expression which Steve could not quite interpret crossed Phoebe's countenance. It might have been pain or dismay. She picked up the cardboard box which contained her tablets and glanced at the prescription label on top.

Finally Phoebe smiled. "Steve," she said, "I made a mistake about the ending of my story. It has come to me just now that it can't finish the way I said it did. You know, Paulette says I'm only a reporter and that I merely tell the things that I know about. If she's right—"

Phoebe fumbled at the flap of the envelope and took out the manuscript. "Do you mind if I fix it now?"

She was already writing on the blank bottom half of the last typed page of her story. "It doesn't matter if this is in longhand." She was using a large fountain pen with a broad point. "And, Steve—"

"Yes?"

Her voice seemed a little heavy—the excitement of

working, perhaps, Steve thought. "Will you see that this envelope with the new ending gets to the post office? I shall not change it again."

She was writing as she talked, her fingers saying one thing, her lips another. Steve could do that trick himself when he was writing a news story, but this, he thought, must be vastly more difficult.

"I'll make sure that it's done," he assured her.

Steve watched, fascinated by the speed at which she wrote. The handwriting was large, and she covered a couple of pages in less than a minute.

When she started on a third page, however, her pace slackened, and she seemed uncertain. Finally, halfway down the page, she stopped, and the pen dropped from her fingers, made a blot on the paper which she had been writing on and rolled across the table and off.

Steve caught the pen before it hit the floor. For a man of his size and sturdy build he was exceedingly quick and deft in all of his movements.

"Finished?" he said as he replaced the pen on the table.

"Quite," she whispered.

Steve looked at her face. Her eyes were staring; they were beginning to seem dull.

"Fresh air, Steve." Her jaw sagged a trifle. It was not quite under control.

Steve was on her side of the huge desk by that time. She couldn't quite get to her feet, so he picked her up and carried her to the casement.

"The window," she said with an effort, "the window—where Rance—used to wait."

He helped her to lean far out.

The motor was still beating out its staggering rhythm. There was still gay conversation and laughter coming from the other side of the house. Out at the corral some of the horses were making restless noises, disturbed, no

doubt, by the party on the lawn. Somewhere in the distance insects were humming industriously.

The night was murmurously alive.

But the woman in Steve's arms had just died.

Chapter Seventeen: THREAT OF DEATH

STEVE WAS SURE OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED, but he knew that he had no right to assume the truth of his own conviction until it was corroborated.

His impulse was to shout for someone to come, but things happened so rapidly that he did not get a chance to do any shouting at all.

No one, by the most fantastic stretch of the imagination, could foresee the speed with which the next sequence of events would get under way.

First a light appeared in the window which Phoebe had earlier pointed out as being in her brother Henry's room.

Hank himself stuck his head out and shouted: "Bunkhouse, corral, stable, turn out! Find Albany!"

Out of the darkness came Albany's voice. "I'm here, comin' up from the corral. What's the matter?"

"Tell you later! Have the boys surround the house. Don't let anybody leave. I'll pick you up outside."

The light in Hank's room went out. Was all this excitement over what had happened here in Phoebe's room where he was, or did it concern something else? He was sure that Phoebe had not uttered a cry, and he himself had made no extraordinary noise. No one but himself could possibly know that she had suffered a sudden attack of some sort. Steve had never seen anyone in the throes of a heart spasm, but it seemed most likely that Phoebe's trouble lay there, especially after what she had said.

Still not frightened, he started to carry Phoebe across

the room to her day bed.

Before he had gone halfway to his destination the clatter of booted feet on the bare stairs and the flinging wide of the door stopped him.

On the threshold stood the young range boss, Albany, covering him with a revolver.

"Why the gun?" Steve asked mildly, steadying down to his usual tempo in the face of something dangerous or not understood.

"Hands up, Boyd. Your turn to reach this time."

"Wait a minute."

"Up!"

"And drop this woman on the floor? I think she's dead."

In back of Albany on the stairs was Hank Dover and half a dozen other men. Hank had learned caution by this time. He was not even in the front line of the support troops. Steve mentally applauded Albany for coming in first. The revolver in his hand wavered a little, but his intentions were courageous.

Steve continued, "You take her from me, Albany, and I'll stick up my hands."

"Damn it, put her down there, on the desk."

Steve did. "Now what?"

"The hands up!"

"As a favor, yes," Steve conceded, "but I could still get in the first shot if I wanted to, if I knew what this is all about."

"You've killed her."

"Who?"

"Phoebe."

"Who says so?"

"I do," said Hank, who had entered as soon as Steve's hands were in the air. "I was sittin' in my room—"

"In the dark?" asked Steve sarcastically.

"Yes. I was watchin' that window." He indicated the

casement. "I knew you was here and I usually keep track of what's goin' on when there's a coyote sniffin' round the chicken yard. Well, I saw everything—first you strugglin' with her in the open window, and then I heard the shot."

"A shot?" Steve repeated incredulously. "Now I know you're crazy. There hasn't been any shot fired around here."

One of the hands had taken Steve's gun from its holster and handed it to Albany. Another was patting Steve's clothing for concealed weapons. Two others held his arms.

Hank had gone to his sister's side.

"No shot fired?" he said. "How about this?" He tore open the front of her gown, which was low anyway.

From a dark hole over her heart there was a slight trickle of blood.

"Good God!"

The exclamation came from the man who was most startled, Stephen Boyd.

"Did you get his gun?" Hank asked.

"Yes," Albany replied.

"Been fired all right, ain't it?"

Albany broke the breech.

"One cartridge shell empty," he reported.

Hank Dover lowered the body of his sister to the desk at which she had concocted so many stories, none of them probably with so dramatic and puzzling an ending as her own life. Because her life was definitely ended. They all knew that now. You could tell from the way her head hung, uncontrolled and slightly to one side.

"So there hasn't been a shot fired around here," sneered Hank, coming over toward Steve. "If you hadn't said so I wouldn't believe it—not with that empty shell in your gun and you the nephew of Rance Seeley, who was killed right here for a dirty skunk— bah!" He

slapped Steve across the mouth with the back of his hand. Steve remembered that he had struck the old veterinary the same way. It was apparently a favorite blow with Hank when he was dealing with someone who was helpless.

Steve felt sure that he must be watching all this happening to someone else on a white screen fifty feet away. Even Hank's blow, which stung his mouth, seemed unreal.

He did not bother to point out that the empty cartridge shell in the cylinder of his gun had originally contained the bullet with which he had shot Hank's revolver out of his hand in the Lost Jackass Saloon earlier in the day. No one would believe that he had not reloaded. Besides, it scarcely seemed necessary to explain.

Something would happen soon, something solid and commonplace, which would show up the events which had taken place in that room during the last few minutes for what they were—the fevered imaginings of someone's brain.

Then something did happen, but it was crazier than the rest.

Albany had placed the opened revolver on the desk. While he was there, so close to Phoebe, his emotions got the better of him—he was only a boy—and with a sob he bent over her. The cheek that he pressed against hers was tear-stained. Steve, who could see that, hastily revised his former somewhat contemptuous opinion of the Eastern cowboy. He really was in love with that woman who was ten years older in years and a couple of centuries older in experience. Steve pitied him from the bottom of his heart. He had been headed for so much unhappiness right from the start, no matter what happened.

There were light, hasty steps on the stairs.

Skippy McGinn came in on the cat feet of a lightweight boxer.

He went unerringly to the desk.

"Get away from my wife, you damp-nosed punk!"

Albany looked up, slightly dazed by this unexpected attack not only upon himself but also upon the integrity of his emotions.

As he raised his chin Skippy got under it with his doubled fist.

Albany landed near the windows and stayed there, not interested for some time in what went on further. It was a merciful anesthesia.

"Gee, Skip, you shouldn't oughta have done that." It was Soso who complained. He was leaning against the doorjamb, smoking a cigarette. "You might break your knuckles if you don't tape 'em before you slug anybody like that."

"Look, Soso, look!" It was a wail of acute despair from Skippy. "Somebody's shot Phoebe. She's dead."

"Dead?" Soso repeated.

"Who did it?" Skippy swept the room with an accusing eye.

His gaze rested on Steve, probably because he was being held between two other men.

"Was it him?" he asked.

Hank had the end of a plug of tobacco in his mouth preparatory to biting it off, but he took it out to say, "Yes."

Skippy went over to Steve. "You slinkin', slimy son of a—" He stopped and addressed the men beside Steve. "Let go of his arms. I can't hit a man who's being held."

The two men looked at Hank for permission. He had just yanked the end off from his plug of tobacco and couldn't for the moment speak.

The men recognized his predicament, but Skippy didn't see what was going on behind his back. "Let go

of his arms, I tell you, or I'll bust you in the jaw too."

The cowboys let go of Steve's arms.

One of Steve's arms came up fast the minute it was released. Skippy could have blocked it, of course, if he had thought that anyone was low enough to act like that, but he never thought of it.

Skippy staggered backward across the room and hit his head on the corner of the desk. He would have been out anyway, but the desk corner helped.

Soso was at his side in a minute. He was counting up to ten in whispers, but no one heard him. Then he rose. "For cripes sakes, don't anybody tell the newspapers about this, or Skippy's repetition will be ruined forever. There he lies, prune on his back, the best boy of his weight in the world." He bent over his unconscious client. "Skippy, you damn fool, why do you have to be so tenderhearted?"

The two cowboys who had released Steve had him under control again. But that did not avert the crackling profanity which Hank swung on a lash around their heads.

"When you get tired," requested Steve, "I'd like to know just who heard this shot fired."

"I did, I told you," Hank answered.

But no one else spoke. The men looked from one to another questioningly, but that was all.

Steve smiled. "Since you're the only one who heard a gun fired, how would it be to guess that you fired it yourself?"

"Don't be dumb. She was my sister. What would I kill her for?"

"I don't know. But I've been a newspaper reporter for a good many years, and at least half of the murders I've covered have been strictly family affairs."

"It won't do you any good to try laying a false trail, Boyd. We've got you good."

"How about nobody hearing any shooting?" Steve persisted stubbornly.

"That's easy. I've thought of the answer to that. The gasoline motor was poundin' away. The shot and the hit on the motor must have come right together. Nobody who wasn't right close would notice it then. Ain't that so, boys?"

They said, "Yes," but there was some doubt in their minds. Even Hank sensed that.

"Wait. I'll prove it. Dad Olsen, you go down in the yard a little ways away from the house, but near enough so we can see you, and fire a shot from your own gun at the same time the engine explodes."

One of the older men, but a hard and tough one, with handle-bar mustaches of a mixed white-and-licorice color, left the room and clattered down the stairs.

"Slim," Hank continued, addressing another of the hands, "you keep a watch out the window. Let us know when you see the flash of his gun, and we'll find out if anybody hears it."

There was silence in the room—waiting. The only movement was made by Hank, who covered the body of his sister with a creamy white Navaho blanket from her day bed.

Outside the nearly continuous banging of the motor.

"There it is!" said Slim at the window.

"Did anybody hear the gun?" Hank demanded.

"I kinda thought I did," said one of the men, "but I wouldn't have knowed what it was if I hadn't knowed what it was."

The others chimed in more or less in complete agreement.

Hank addressed Steve: "There goes that idea of yours. There's a lot of witnesses here to testify in court if it ever gets to that, for which I shouldn't think would be rightly necessary."

"Hello, up there!" It was a feminine voice from the bottom of the stairs. "Somebody is shooting off a gun out in the grounds."

Hank went to look down the staircase. "Come up here, Paulette. Phoebe's dead."

"What?" She flew up on the wings of the wind. "What did you say was the matter with Phoebe? Where is she?"

Hank indicated the blanket-covered figure on the desk.

Paulette started toward the desk but stopped on the side farthest away from the body, the side where Phoebe's desk chair stood.

"Who did it?" she asked. She was frightened. Steve knew what she feared, too, that Nels had been caught. She still loved him. Steve knew that.

"The man the Seeleys imported to do their dirty work, that gangster!" Hank told her that, pointing toward their prisoner.

Paulette noticed Steve for the first time.

"Oh—you." She had thought it would be Nels. There was so much relief in her voice that Steve knew that she would do anything to protect the man she thought had taken his belated vengeance.

But she had no comfort in her respite. She couldn't exult over the predicament of the man who had saved her from an ultimate agony. She turned her back on Steve. He smiled. She ought to know him better than to think that he would try to break down her resolution by pleading, even with his eyes. Idly she picked up the manuscript which lay on the desk.

"Better let everything alone," warned Hank.

"Perhaps you're right." Paulette still held the papers, dazed. "But this is the last installment of Phoebe's serial. I happen to know that it must be in the mail tomorrow —air mail—or the entire magazine will be held up, and they'll deduct the extra expense from what they owe Phoebe."

"Is that so?" Hank was suddenly more interested. "In that case I guess I'd better attend to it, me being the principal heir and everything."

"Are you?" Paulette asked.

"Yes, I believe so."

"How about her daughter?"

"Oh, she's under observation right now for mental trouble like her father. Her mother was talking to me only yesterday about havin' Joan committed. I'm the heir all right. Hand me the papers."

Paulette, strangely enough, did not give him an argument in rebuttal of the astonishing statement which Hank had just made. Something else seemed to have knocked even the memory of it out of her mind. She handed Hank all but the final pages, which included the ones in longhand. Her eye had caught a word here and there, and now she read all that Phoebe had written during the last few seconds of her life.

"Does that go, too, that stuff in Phoebe's handwriting?"

"Yes." Paulette's voice held a strange excitement. "Yes, put this in. The editor will understand why it was written in longhand."

Hank clumsily crowded the manuscript into the large envelope, which he sealed.

"Notice, all you men," he said, "that I did this myself and that it is not to be tampered with by anybody. The envelope is all addressed and stamped. But it's goin' to be in Uncle Sam's hands before the sheriff comes nosin' around here. He might make us keep everything in this room that was here when Phoebe died, but what ain't here when he arrives he can't do nothin' about. And this is an important business matter." He cast his eye around the room. "Horseface," he addressed one of his younger hands, "I can trust you. I want you to take one of the cars and deliver this to the post office right

now—pronto."

The young man took the envelope. "Shall I notify Sheriff Carver?"

"No. I don't guess I want you to mention what happened here to anybody. I'll telephone the sheriff when I'm ready for him."

"I could mail that," Paulette suggested. "I'm going back to the village."

"No," Hank decided. "Besides, I'd rather you didn't leave. Not just now awhile. You know, we haven't got any women of the family in the house, and you bein' such a friend—"

"I get you. You mean I can't leave."

"Don't put it that way, Miss Paulette."

"Why not? That's the way it is, isn't it, Mr. Dover?"

They love each other like a couple of bulldogs who have just met at the same fireplug, Steve thought, and he sensed that Paulette was suddenly on his side. He wondered why.

That he was in serious danger Steve had been well aware from the first; but now that it was evident that Paulette was being held at the ranch and that Hank did not want the sheriff notified until he, personally, gave the word, it looked as if the threat of death was heading that way on horseback. Just what form it would take Steve wasn't sure, and he suspected that Hank was not certain either, but it was safe to hazard a couple of guesses.

Horseface was leaving with the mail.

Chapter Eighteen: LYNCHING PARTY

"DOES JOAN KNOW ABOUT HER MOTHER?" Paulette asked.

No one else answered, so finally Steve did: "Not yet, I believe."

"She certainly has to find out sooner or later," de-

clared Paulette, "and it's better to break it gently than to have her stumble in here and come face to face with the most terrible thing in her life without any warning. I suggest that it would be a nice idea for all of us to go downstairs where we can tell her more impersonally.'

"She's outside helpin' entertain the folks, I guess,' vouchsafed Hank. "I'll go fetch her into the living-room." To the hands he said as he left, "Bring that woman-killer downstairs with you."

Steve let it pass. For the sake of the record he knew that he should protest against being publicly branded guilty. But there had been too much talk.

The entire party, even including Albany and Skippy who had to be assisted, descended to the living-room.

Steve, who now had time to look at it critically, realized that this was one part of the house that Phoebe had left strictly in the tradition of her forefathers.

There was nothing either ornate, in the style of the 'nineties, or simplified to abstraction, as is the wont nowadays. In one corner was a grandfather's clock which some ancestor had carted West in a Conestoga wagon. On the walls were several framed copies of etchings, none of them good, and some colored enlargements of photographs. There was a two-shelf bookcase nearly filled with books. The floor was covered by handmade rugs now beautifully faded. Against one wall stood a hand-hewn table with wooden dowels. There were nearly a dozen rocking-chairs. One was a very old horse-hair affair which matched a sofa, both samples of America's most hideous furniture period. Next to it was another historical gem, a patent rocker with carpet upholstery in the seat and back. The balance of the collection included an all-wood Windsor rocker which was very comfortable, several high-backed upholstered affairs, and lastly, a couple of overstuffed, chintz-covered monsters.

Double doors standing open gave upon a dining-room, also of generous proportions, furnished with a long table covered with a white cloth and kept "set" all the time—that is, with a napkin, goblet, silver, and a plate face down at each place. The places were definitely marked by straight chairs, not all of one vintage, pushed up close.

On the dining-room wall was an ancient example of the coffee-grinder type of telephone.

Both Steve and Paulette spied the instrument at the same moment. A telephone is a newspaperman's heathen idol. Come what may, storm, flood, ruin, fire, battle, death, and disaster, it is his magic charm against time and distance, as well as the weapon with which he defeats his mortal rivals.

The two reporters started toward it.

Naturally Steve was stopped short by the men who were holding him.

"Ladies first," Steve said to Paulette with rueful gallantry as she gave the bell handle a whirl.

"Give me long-distance," she said. "You *are* long-distance? And right on the job, too, even at one-thirty a.m. I'll never laugh at a rural-telephone joke again. Get me the San Francisco *Sentinel* in San Francisco, California. This is a press call, station to station, so please reverse the charges. Thank you. I'll hold it."

"Who are you telephoning to?" Hank, entering with Joan, still the untroubled child princess all in white, saw and heard what Paulette was doing.

"Hello," said Paulette into the mouthpiece. "No, not yet. I'm waiting."

Hank walked over to her. "Here, gimme that." He yanked the telephone out of her grasp. With his hand over the mouthpiece he turned accusingly on those of his own men who were in the room. "And I suppose nobody would ever think to stop her? All the brains you cow hands got is in the seat o' your pants." Into the in-

strument he said, "No, there's nobody here calling San Francisco," and hung up.

Joan had seen that Steve was being held, and she went to him.

"What's the trouble?" she asked.

"Are you able to take a little bad news, kid?" Steve asked her.

"Keep away from that murderer, Joan!" Hank ordered.

"Let me tell her," requested Steve. "I don't shout everything quite so loud as you do, and let's spare her all we can."

Hank grumbled to himself, apparently of two minds whether to swallow this insult or not.

While he was doing that Steve said, "Your mother would have wanted me to be the one to say good-by to you for her."

"She's not coming back?" She asked it casually but with an effort to hold her voice steady. Steve knew she was entirely aware of what he meant.

"No."

Jimmie Baxter was right behind her. It was a position he seemed to have been assigned to for life. When she turned he was there, and for a moment she hid her head against the pocket of his shirt; he was that much taller. He looked across Joan's head at Steve and thanked him with his eyes for breaking the news to her that way.

No one spoke while Joan absorbed her grief. Finally her ideas sorted themselves out a little. She raised her head. "What did my uncle mean by calling you a murderer?" she asked of Steve.

"That's what he is," Hank interposed. "He's the one who did it—killed your mother, I mean."

Joan didn't look at Hank. With her eyes steadily on Steve she asked, "That isn't true, of course?"

"No."

"What did you expect him to say?" demanded Hank

with what seemed justifiable exasperation. "No man is voluntarily going to talk himself into a nap in the poison-gas chamber."

"I expected him to say 'no,'" Joan admitted with patient sadness, "but then I knew he hadn't done what you said anyway."

"How in time could you know? You wasn't here and you never met this snake before today."

Joan nodded her head. "You're quite right, but I don't think it matters how I know."

"It matters a great deal to me," said Steve.

"I was excepting you." She seemed to direct all of her conversation at Steve. "Is she upstairs?"

"Yes."

"May I go with you?" Paulette volunteered.

"Thanks. I believe I'd rather go alone."

She went to the stairs and climbed them. Baxter stood at the foot. Steve interpreted his action as meaning that no one was to follow. *Good lad,* he said mentally.

The telephone started ringing.

Hank was nearest to it. He answered. "Hello. I don't care if you are ready with San Francisco. Cancel the call."

Paulette exchanged swift glances with Steve. He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't do anything about it and, after all, why should I be helping you to scoop my paper?"

The large room was gradually filling with people. The word had gotten around somehow, and the merrymakers from outdoors were crowding in, some of them with sandwiches and drinks in their hands. Profane questions mingled with the fluttering curiosity of the women, who were telling and retelling a constantly improving story to each newcomer as he or she entered.

Above the babel the telephone burst forth again.

"Damn it," said Hank into the instrument, "I told

you that— Oh, hello, Sheriff. I didn't recognize your voice."

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned on the whispering chorus. "Shut up, you bellering heifers!"

An obedient silence wiped the air clear.

"What do you want, Sheriff? You want to know if there's a man named Boyd here? I don't know. There's quite a lot of folks stopped by after the dance in town. I'll look and see if I can find him for you. No trouble. Not at all. G'by."

Hank looked balefully at his silent kinsmen, as if daring any one of them to call him a liar. Steve laughed. No one else did anything. Hank turned back to the telephone and, with a single pull, using both hands, he yanked it loose from the wall. The wires dangled.

Hank handed the disconnected apparatus to one of the men. "Keep this," he said. "There won't be anybody hookin' it up until I want to use it myself."

Somewhere from inside the building came a *thump-shuffle-shuffle, thump-shuffle-shuffle,* which Steve could not immediately identify.

Hank had no such trouble. "It's Father," he said and went to a side door leading into the living-room, which so far had been shut.

He opened the door and John Dover entered. The thump when he walked was explained by a rifle which he carried by the barrel and used as a cane. The shuffling came, of course, from slippers which he did not raise from the floor as he progressed. He wore, besides slippers, a striped flannelette nightgown which nearly touched the floor and a white cap on his head.

But it wasn't funny.

Neither was it amusing when he took one step into the room and fell forward on his face. The rifle flew out of his hands and clattered harshly on a bare spot on the floor.

Hank would have helped him to rise, but the old man pushed his son aside and scrabbled to his uncertain feet all by himself. One of the cowboys picked up the rifle and handed it to him.

"I've heard what's happened; I've heard that Phoebe's dead." He asked no questions, merely made the announcement in a pitiful, old voice.

He look around the room until his eyes rested on Steve.

"I told you to keep away. I told you!" His rising voice would have ended in a shriek if he had not controlled it himself. He seemed to recollect something that confused him. "But I thought *you* was the one who was dead. And now they say it's little Phoebe. What happened? Who killed her?"

"He did." Hank pointed at Steve.

"But I saw him outside of her window," John Dover continued, quavering. "Wasn't that where he got shot?"

"That was fifteen years ago." Paulette made the effort to correct him before he got too tangled.

"No, no; it was tonight. I couldn't sleep and—"

On the stairs, coming down, was Joan. She had Steve's gun in her hand.

"Is this the revolver that was supposed to have been used?" she asked.

"Don't interrupt your granddad," Hank advised. "He's takin' it pretty hard, like I knew he would."

"But this gun hasn't been fired since I saw it early this evening over at the fat-stock barn."

"Hush! We'll come to that later."

Old John Dover was indeed "taking it hard," as his son said. He was making the horrible whimpering sounds of an animal in mortal pain.

Now he controlled himself and became articulate again.

There was majesty left in him. He swept the room

with a terrifying, contemptuous glance. "Are there any Dovers among ye, any men even, or are you all just women, standin' by, doin' nothin' while the murderer of my daughter, the killer of a woman, still draws the breath of life in the same room with ye?"

"We'll tend to him," Hank assured his father placatingly. "You go back to bed."

"You'll tend to him?" John Dover repeated scornfully. "When? Tomorrow? Next month? Sometime after Phoebe's rotted in her grave? Is that the way the Dovers square accounts nowadays?"

The voice of the patriarch of the clan had a power to sway his followers. There was a little murmur of excitement as they listened to his sarcastic arraignment of themselves.

"By God, when I was as young as you are now, we didn't wait. Wait for what? For a waddlin' fool sheriff, elected by the Seeleys, to come and take a red-handed murderer away from us?"

Outside, such of the ranchers as couldn't crowd into the living-room were shouting questions: "What's goin' on? Who's hurt?" "What's the matter?" "Come outside where we can all hear!"

"We're comin' out!" shouted old John Dover, marching toward the door. "Come on, everybody!"

He did not shuffle now or lean on the rifle. He slammed the butt of the weapon on the floor at each step, and as he walked he swung the barrel in an arc as if it were Tannhäuser's staff. Steve, watching the old man with the detachment of a disinterested spectator, mentally supplied the majestic Wagnerian music.

The room emptied itself in a turgid stream, following the exit of the head of the house. Steve was dragged with the current.

Outside, those who knew were excitedly telling those who didn't what had taken place in the house. To some

it was the first authentic news of Phoebe's death.

Steve looked them over. They were his judge and jury; he knew that. He had probably seen all of them during the day, either at the saloon or at the rodeo. They had been just ordinary people then, no different from the men and women in the street in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Des Moines, Iowa, or Little Rock, Arkansas—law-abiding American citizens with maybe a drink or two more than usual under their belts, because it was a festive occasion, but with no purpose in life more serious than that of having a good time.

But now a fevered current of something which they did not quite understand even themselves was running through their veins, a force that replaced individual reasoning power. They were looking at him as if he were some kind of trapped animal, not a human being. Some struck at him; others avoided him entirely, depending upon their natures and the pitch of their frenzy.

Steve had seen that change take place in a mob once before, when as a newspaper reporter he had covered a jail delivery in a small and ordinarily sleepy, peaceful California city. The people there had been driven before a hurricane of fury they were powerless to combat. Later, in shame, they tried to erase even the memory by cutting down and uprooting the tree in the courthouse square where the final act of their midnight madness had taken place.

To Steve, because he had watched a similar hysteria before, it was no surprise that there was no haranguing, no intelligible argument for or against their instinctive purpose. Even had there been a Mark Antony in the crowd it is doubtful if they would have listened to him.

It is true that Joan tried to say something; she even attempted to work her way to where Steve was standing. But her voice was drowned in the guttural murmurs of the arousing beast, and she was physically shunted off

to one side along with Paulette and such of the other women as had not gone more demented than their men.

The old man in his nightgown, like a terrible, avenging Moses, led his people with unerring purpose toward the huge barn at the rear of the ranch house.

There was a mumble of questions as to where they were going and why. John Dover answered them by halting in the main barn door and pointing above.

There on its roof-high carrier track the hay hoist was mounted, the rope and pulley swung back and cleated inside the hayloft window.

The idea was grasped at once without debate.

Two boys entered the barn from below and appeared a few moments later at the loft opening. They unfastened the lines and swung them down to the upraised hands of a dozen men below.

A neighboring rancher with an open-topped car was backing it up the earthen ramp which led to the barn door. Someone tied one end of the hay-hoist tackle to the rear axle of the automobile. Four or five men pulled on the slack to make sure the hitch would not slip.

The two cowboys who had been holding Steve by the arms dragged him up the incline.

Steve made no resistance—he knew it would be useless against such odds—but they hustled him along as if he were fighting every step. Speed and the pretense of struggle are all part of the pageant of persecution.

Steve was still only a spectator. He reflected grimly that if he could hold that attitude of mind to the very end he would be able to disappoint a large number of expectant Dovers who were probably looking forward to a frantic appeal for mercy. He chuckled to himself. What an extraordinary excuse for donning the habiliments of heroism, merely to make a lot of other human beings, no different actually from himself, feel that they had been cheated out of the satisfaction of terrifying

the object of their rabble-roused abhorrence.

The motor of the car was running. Someone was tying the rather intricate hangman's knot preparatory to slipping it over Steve's head.

That was as far as they had gone when the lights went out and, with them, the banging of the generator engine.

Chapter Nineteen: QUOTE, NO ORDINARY CRIME, UNQUOTE

SILENCE AND DARKNESS crushed down from above, as if a giant black palm had reached to the earth to pick up a handful of its squirming people.

"Gents," said a very pleasant voice, "this here is an old-fashioned stick-up. Everybody that steps into the barn right pronto with his hands up don't get shot. The others will be buried from Pitman's Homelike Funeral Parlors in Outlaw day after tomorrow at two p.m. sharp. We're firin' one shot in the air right now to show we mean business. Then I'll begin countin' the seconds. After thirty of 'em there won't be no safe place except inside. Let her go, Jesse James!"

There was a throaty crash from a heavy-caliber pistol.

Directly after that the original speaker began counting: "One second, two seconds, three seconds, four seconds—"

While the counter continued another voice advised, "You'd oughta hurry, fellas, or you'll get jammed in the door during the final rush, just like before Christmas. Mr. Boyd, if anybody tries to stop you as you come this way speak up, and we won't wait to uncork the fireworks."

No one did try to stop Steve, excepting old John Dover. He clung to the younger man's arms and struck at him with feeble, frantic fists.

"Don't shoot this man," shouted Steve as he dragged his assailant, rifle and all, down the ramp.

"Why not?" demanded John Dover himself. "Go ahead; shoot me. Dammit, I ain't too old to be shot. And even if I am old I'm more of a man than my son and my grandsons."

"Hush!" said Steve, speaking directly into the old man's ear. "That's why. I'm aimin' to keep the real men of this county alive. We Seeleys have got to have somebody to fight with."

That floored and puzzled the old man at one and the same time. He didn't know whether he was being complimented or kidded. He came along with Steve.

All the other Dover men and such of the women as were in the lynching party entered the barn, and one of the stick-up men with guns—there were only two—closed the doors and locked the padlock which hung in the staple on one side.

Steve was able to see a little better now that his eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness.

"Hello, Ranger; heigh-ho, Silver," he said by way of greeting to the entire rescuing party. "The Seeleys are kind of losing their grip, ain't they? It don't seem as if it ought to take two of you to handle the Dover outfit."

"No," admitted Sears, "that's what my pard here said, but I had nothin' else to do so I come along for the ride. I live out this way anyhow. Hey, what's the matter here?"

Old John Dover had come to the end of his nervous strength. He started to fall. Steve caught him by the slack of his nightie with one hand and grabbed the rifle with the other.

"He's worn out," Steve diagnosed as he lowered his sincerest enemy to the ground. He raised his voice. "Joan, are you there somewhere?"

"Yes, Steve." The voice was from the shadow of the house. The women had taken refuge there.

"Come here, kid, and take care of your granddad."

She came forward, still misty-white beauty in a hag-

gard, witch-ridden world.

"We've got to leave," Steve explained.

"Yeah," supplemented Scott. "I rented a car by the hour, and the time's nearly up."

"Just do what you can for Mr. Dover. I think he'll snap out of it all right in a little while. He's a game bird, even if he does fly a little funny."

"And," added Sears, "when we've had about ten minutes' start open up the barn door if the boys ain't broke it down first. Here's the key. C'mon, Steve."

"So long, Joan," said Steve. "I'm sorry about everything. Thanks for believing I wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

He was moving away.

"Bring that rifle with you, Steve," admonished Scott. "No use givin' him a chance to throw any lead after us. John Dover used to be the best rifleshot in the county."

Joan picked up the rifle and handed it to Steve. "Take good care of yourself," she said softly. It was the age-old parting injunction of women to their men.

There was a car around in front of the house, rather a large one but not very modern. In it sat a man whom no one recognized but Steve.

"Hello, Gunnarson," he said. "Where have you been all the evening?"

"Oh, around," replied Gunnarson, waving his hand a little vaguely.

"Meet Mr. Nels Gunnarson; Messrs. Scott and Sears Seeley."

Scott was settling himself in the driver's seat. Steve and Sears climbed in. "You can't go with us, Mr. Gunnarson," declared Scott above the roar of the starter.

"Why not?" asked Gunnarson. "I'm the only man in the world who can prove that Steve Boyd here didn't murder my ex-wife, Phoebe Dover."

"How can you do that?" Scott was skeptical. "Did you

do it yourself?"

"No. I might have but I didn't."

"Let's get out of here and ask questions later," suggested Sears. "I think I hear that barn door splinterin' right now."

The car slipped into gear and went thundering down the ranch drive to the highway.

"Doggone," exclaimed Sears with regret in his voice, "I've come away with the governor off their electric-light-plant engine in my pants pocket."

"They can probably get another," Scott said by way of comfort.

"Not nearer than Chicago," was Sears's cheerful opinion.

"That's just about the right distance," Scott declared. "They'll have lights again along come Christmas."

Before they quite reached the cottonwood windbreak Scott, without warning, abruptly switched off his headlights and then, instead of driving along the road which was in front of the trees, he steered off into the open field which was on the other side and stopped there, just back of the leafy screen.

"What the—!"

"Sheriff comin' with a posse. Shut up!"

Scott was right. Half a dozen cars were turning off from the main highway. In ten minutes they passed on the other side of the windbreak. Then Scott backed onto the road once more and drove without lights as far as the ranch entrance and onto the highway.

"How did the sheriff know there was trouble at the Ring-Bar-X?" Steve asked.

"I told him," Scott explained. "I wasn't sure we could handle everything without help so I notified him."

"Then how did you know?"

"You've probably forgotten about Switchboard Sadie, the beautiful night-shift telephone operator, and the

fact that the county exchange is right there in the office of the Outlaw *Post*. We were all sittin' there just waitin' when that call for the San Francisco *Sentinel* came in from the Ring-Bar-X. When Sadie told me that Hank had canceled the call we thought something was wrong, so she got the sheriff on the telephone and hooked him up to the ranch while we listened in. Hank's end of the conversation didn't sound any too good, and when later we discovered the phone was disconnected I put a couple and another couple together, getting the usual answer of four. We set out to find you. I tried every place in town, the hotel, and the four saloons. The Ring-Bar-X looked like the next best bet. It was kind of melodramatic, wasn't it, the way we got there almost the last second?"

"We could of stopped the hangin' a few minutes sooner," said Sears, "only I got so interested watchin' what was goin' on I forgot what we was there for."

"Now," suggested Scott, "if you'll tell me what happened I'll be all ready as soon as we get to the print shop to hand-set the story without writin' it out."

"Can anybody still do that?"

"Do what?"

"Compose and hand-set as he goes along?"

"I can," Scott admitted modestly. "So can Sadie."

"Say, who is this Sadie? Are you married to her?"

"Why, yes—but it's a secret."

"From who?" inquired Sears mildly. "I personally have knowed it for a couple of years, and it was told to me by all but one of the members of the Methodist Ladies' Aid."

"What was the matter with the one who didn't?" Steve inquired.

"She's Sadie's mother, and I think she's kinda ashamed of what she got for a son-in-law. My guess is she hopes the whole thing'll blow over and people will forget about it."

"Stow it, Sears!" ordered Scott and turned to Steve. "How about the story of what happened at the ranch?"

"How fast can you set type?"

"Almost as fast as you can talk."

"And Sadie?"

"She's a little faster than I am."

"Swell. Here's how we can handle it." Steve outlined: "I'll dictate the story over the telephone to a rewrite man in my own newspaper office in Los Angeles, and you can set it as we go along. I'll talk slow and in short paragraphs. Let Sadie take the first paragraph, you the second, and we'll alternate all the way through."

"You don't think you can hang around the Outlaw *Post* office after that gang gets loose back there on the Ring-Bar-X, do you?" Scott questioned. "They'll be shootin' at you through every window."

"I'll have to chance it."

"Yeah, that's all right for you, but how about my furniture and equipment?"

"I'll put all damages on my expense account."

"And how do I collect that without your signed vouchers?"

"I'm going to sign them."

"But you'll be dead."

"I haven't got time for that."

The car slowed down and stopped.

"Here we are," announced Scott.

"Good," applauded Steve, scrambling out. "Lead me to Sadie. Nels, you stick around outside in the car, and then you and I will go somewhere after I'm through."

"Jail, I expect," said Sears.

Scott came into his sanctum, shedding his coat and detachable cuffs, which he wore not attached to anything when his sleeves were rolled up, as now.

Steve was talking as he entered: "Get me the *Bulletin* —that's a newspaper in Los Angeles—on the telephone."

"Here's your party," said Sadie, handing him a French telephone, the only one in Outlaw.

"How in the name of Beelzebub and his four stooges from—?"

"Mr. Seeley told me to get 'em on the line when I heard his car coming down the street," Sadie explained.

"And besides all that you're beautiful," declared Steve in mock amazement, his hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. "I never before saw efficiency coupled with streamlines, golden hair, rose-petal cheeks, cherry lips and— Say, what are you doing when you go off duty?"

She was getting mad. Scott stopped her before she exploded.

"He's kidding you, darling. Steve knows all about us, my little chickadee; apparently everybody does. We'll announce our marriage in the social column tomorrow."

"We'd have had to in about a month anyway."

Sears said, "Everybody knows that too. I've been knittin' for two weeks myself."

Scott Seeley told his wife what the plan was while Steve, over the telephone, was getting a Los Angeles *Bulletin* rewrite man on the other end of the line.

"Who is this?" Steve asked. "Pancake Reilly? Good goin'! Here's the lead paragraph.

"Phoebe Dover, well-known authoress, was shot and killed just after midnight last night—you stick in the date—in her home on the Ring-Bar-X ranch near Outlaw, Arizona.

"Paragraph. Sheriff Carver has the case well in hand, and although he has made no arrest as yet—"

"He's going to right now." That was another voice near the door. It had a Smith and Wesson, a body, and a Stetson.

"Oh, hello, Sheriff." Into the telephone Steve said, "Pancake, cut that line, 'Oh, hello, Sheriff.' I was speak-

ing to my friend, Sheriff Carver, who just walked in. I'll interview him later and call you again to let you know what he says. And I'll get a photograph of him in the first air mail out of here. Where were we? Oh yes, 'has made no arrest as yet,' but he has a number of definite clues." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Are you getting this, Sadie?"

"Oke!" Her nimble fingers were flying over the type racks. "I've got it all. We lost Scott a ways back."

Which was quite true. Upon the entrance of the sheriff the editor and publisher of the Outlaw *Post* had dropped his composing-stick and had pied whatever part of the second paragraph he had set.

Steve looked inquiringly at Sadie, who really was beautiful now if she never had been before, excitement staining her cheeks and parting her lips in the expression of a four-year-old cherub.

"Can you take it?" Steve asked.

"I can take it."

"Good girl." Into the mouthpiece: "The clues which are in the possession of Sheriff Carver, the accounts of witnesses who arrived on the scene shortly after the crime was committed, and a considerable weight of circumstantial evidence point to Stephen Boyd, of Los Angeles, as the murderer. Yes, I said Stephen Boyd. Dammit, I know that's my own name. I'm talking about me. I'm the suspect. Here we go.

"Sheriff Carver, who has long been the law in this county, says the motive was revenge.

"This theory is based on the fact that fifteen years ago an uncle of Stephen Boyd's, Ransom Seeley, was killed on the premises of the Dover ranch, known as the Ring-Bar-X, under circumstances which—"

"He was killed by Nels Gunnarson," prompted the sheriff, who had been so lulled by the musical sound of his own name repeated again and again in Steve's ac-

count that he had momentarily forgotten his original purpose and just wanted to be helpful. "Yes, Nels Gunnarson did it."

"No, you're wrong there, Sheriff."

The sheriff jumped, as if he'd been torpedoed. "Hell and repeat!" he said soulfully.

Before Sheriff Carver could turn around, Nels, who had entered and was standing on catlike feet directly in back of him, deftly nipped Outlaw's only official revolver out of his hand.

Nels was now very well armed. He had been carrying old John Dover's rifle when he came in.

"Go on, Steve," advised Nels.

"—under circumstances," Steve said into the telephone, "which made it appear to be a part of a half-century-old feud between the Dover family and the Seeley family, both pioneer residents of the state of Arizona.

"Sheriff Carver asserts, quote, 'The death of Phoebe Dover on the eve of her marriage to George Woodstock is no ordinary crime. It is, in fact,' unquote, he says, quote, 'more like the plot of one of Shakespeare's immortal tragedies such as,' single quote, 'Romeo and Juliet,' end single quote, 'which it considerably resembles.' Unquote.

"Attention, Pancake. Make this next a special flash.

"Sheriff Carver has left his deputies in charge of the situation at the Ring-Bar-X ranch and has returned alone to the wicked little Western city appropriately named Outlaw to arrest the alleged murderer, Stephen Boyd, singlehanded."

Steve covered the mouthpiece. "That's right, isn't it, Sheriff?"

"Yes." Sheriff Carver admitted his bravery.

"Thanks. I just wanted to be sure you were alone. Take him out to the car, Nels. I'll be with you as soon as the boys and I decide what to do next."

Nels Gunnarson regarded his prisoner without any particular ferocity. "Sheriff, it seems to me you must have heard what Steve said. It's your move."

Chapter Twenty: ON TO THE HOOSEGOW

WHEN THE LOCAL GUARDIAN OF THE PEACE had been escorted outside, Steve finished dictating his story to Los Angeles.

Sadie completed her job of typesetting immediately thereafter and pulled a proof on it.

"Correct it yourself, Sadie," requested her husband, "while I get the press ready to kick off the city edition."

As he worked, Scott outlined his suggestion as to what had better be done. "Sears and his father and brother run the biggest Seeley outfit around here. The Seeleys don't own as much land or hire as many hands as the Dovers, but we think we're a little tougher. Suppose you go with Sears to his place, and I'll pass the word around for the rest of the family to meet there. There should be quite a gang on hand by daybreak. We'll need everybody, because you can bet the Dovers'll be comin' after you with anything that will shoot, from a bean blower to field artillery."

"Wouldn't it be a little easier if I should just drive to the nearest airport and take the first plane out for most anywhere?" Steve inquired practically.

"Run away?"

"Oh-oh!" said Steve. "I can tell from the tone of your voice that Seeleys never run away."

Sears was of the opinion that the family would be able to stand off the Dovers indefinitely.

"Do you mean to say that you would have a regular pitched battle just to save me from being arrested?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because a lot of people would get hurt and maybe some killed; that's why. Then hard feelings around here would last longer than ever."

Scott had locked the front-page form now and was carrying it to the flat bed of the press.

"They asked for it," he declared grimly.

"Their wives and kids didn't ask for it, leastwise not most of 'em. This isn't Europe, you know. Under the Stars and Stripes we try to have at least one live man with arms and legs for each and every woman."

"Yippee!" shouted Sears, but with a mute on. From there he went into a spirited rendition of "God Bless America" with imitation trumpet calls and a roll of drums in it.

"Now," said Sears, "what was it you were going to say when I was took sudden with patriotism?"

"I'm not going to *say* anything more to you lugs. I'm going to *do* something that will finish all further arguments."

" 'Such as what,' quoth the inquisitive rabbit."

"I'm going to move into your spacious county jail and stand trial, if the sheriff will lend me the key."

"Stand trial? You won't have a chance." Scott entered the argument with more seriousness and force. "Even if you should get a fair trial—which you won't—the evidence against you is too strong. No jury is going to let you go."

"*You* don't believe I killed the woman, do you?" asked Steve, startled.

"No-o-o," replied Scott slowly, "but I'm a Seeley. I couldn't get on the jury anyhow."

"Oh, I see. So you *do* think I killed her?"

"What difference would it make if I did?"

"A hell of a lot of difference. I'm not inviting a bunch of nice people to take their lives in their hands to defend anybody they even think might be a killer." Steve was backing away toward the door. "I'm pretty sure Gunnar-

son really thinks I'm innocent. I'll go with him. In the meantime I'd like to make a request of Sadie."

"Go right ahead, Steve," said Mrs. Scott Seeley.

"Rewrite that story a little and telephone it in to the San Francisco *Sentinel*. Reverse the charges and say it comes from Paulette Dubois, will you?"

"Sure, but look, Steve," Sadie pointed out, "that'll ruin your exclusive."

"It might make it just a little moldy," Steve admitted, "but I've got a hunch she'd do the same for me."

"I'll bet you're right," agreed Sadie with shining eyes. "I would."

"Say, wait a minute, Sadie," admonished her long, lanky husband. "Save your hip-hip-hoorays for me. After all, I'm the father of your quintuplets, ain't I?"

"No, not if they're quintuplets, you aren't. Good-by, Sydney Carton, and if you hear anybody singing 'O Solo Mio' outside the jail window it will be me."

"And," added Scott, "when you hear her stop with a squawk right in the middle of a high note that'll be me."

Outside of the printing-office, when he turned around, Steve found himself being pressed slightly in the abdomen by a six-gun in the hands of the sheriff.

Steve, looking over the sheriff's shoulder, saw that Nels Gunnarson was standing with his arms around a telephone pole, his wrists locked with a pair of handcuffs.

There was no one else in sight in the deserted street.

"The situation has changed a little since I looked at the picture," said Steve as he raised his hands obligingly.

"Not much, really," declared Nels Gunnarson. "Actually you can take that gun away from the sheriff any time you like. There aren't any cartridges in it. I took 'em out while it was in my possession."

"That's an old, old trick," said Sheriff Carver skep-

tically. "I'm supposed to look and see if the cartridges really have been removed, and while I'm doing that Steve here hits me on the chin or wherever is handiest. Lemme see, I think that one was first worked on the Indian aborigines in these parts by a Spanish conquistador named Coronado."

"Is it a trick?" Steve asked Gunnarson guilelessly.

"No," Nels assured him.

"If you move I'll pull the trigger," said the sheriff.

Steve dropped his hands.

The hammer on the revolver snapped.

The sheriff swore.

Nels Gunnarson let out a delighted "Haw-haw."

Steve put his arm around the old officer's sagging shoulders. "It's all right, Sheriff. I'm giving myself up anyway."

Nels was not even surprised. "I thought you would. Sheriff, if you'll unlock me we'll all walk to the jail together. You can reload on the way over."

Sheriff Carver reloaded first, but otherwise the program was carried out exactly according to Gunnarson's specifications.

Chapter Twenty-One: JUST A COINCIDENCE

THE ADOBE JAIL WAS RATHER LARGE, and the bars were strong, although they did not keep out flies and mosquitoes. There were half a dozen cells, only one of them occupied. A half-breed Indian was sleeping off an illegal drunk in it, dead to the world.

Nels Gunnarson, as the sheriff locked the door on his cell, said, "This is the same room I had fifteen years ago. There's my name over the upper bunk."

Sheriff Carver heaved a sigh of relief after he had locked Steve in the adjoining accommodations. "I'm sorry to have to do this to you two hombres, but I think

the county will be a lot quieter while you stay in there I'll have the Chink send you some breakfast as soon a it's ready. Mebbe you better get a little sleep thougl while it's still dark."

"What time is it?" asked Steve. "I forgot to wind my watch."

"Four-sixteen a.m.," replied the sheriff, looking at an old-fashioned, hunting-case silver pocket chronometer.

"Thanks." Steve was setting his wrist watch. "At this time yesterday morning I was in a tourist camp in California, hadn't even crossed into Arizona yet."

"You'd of been lucky if you'd had a wreck that landed you in a hospital on the other side of the line," was the gloomy opinion of the sheriff.

"You don't think my chances are very good, do you?" asked Steve.

"I wish I did. The Dovers carry a lot of weight with the law in this county."

"I see. That's about what Scott Seeley said. It doesn't seem to be so much a matter of guilt as which clan you belong to; is that it?"

"Just about."

"Nels belonged to the Dover family," Steve pointed out, "and he had to take the rap."

"You mean he had to be confined? Yeah, that's true, but what he got was a lot better than what he was headed for."

"I see. Dover influence, huh?"

"Might be. Old John Dover was younger then and took quite a hand in things. And he'd always do anything his daughter wanted him to. The word kind of passed around about what he thought ought to be done, and I guess even the jury heard about it. Savvy?"

"Completely."

In the distance, and faintly, came the beat of hoofs upon pavement, not entirely a pleasant sound to those

who love horses, because they were never intended to be ridden fast or even at all on automobile highways.

"They're comin'!" the sheriff remarked uneasily.

"Who?"

"It might be anybody."

"But that isn't what you think." Steve diagnosed the old man's nervousness correctly. "Anybody around here you can swear in as deputies?"

"Not in time. I shouldn't have left so many of my boys out at the ranch."

The sound of loping hoofs grew nearer. It seemed to be coming from several directions at once.

"I'd better go outside," said the sheriff. "I'm kind of sorry you boys gave yourselves up."

"Do you mind?" asked Steve of Nels after the officer of the law had left through the main door which he carefully locked after him.

"Not in the least," replied Gunnarson, "although I don't think I'm in quite the same kind of a spot that you are—in case, that is—"

"That's what I meant—in case." Steve rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"Would you be so kind," began the other. "I find that I have no—"

Steve started to pass him the tobacco and papers.

"I mean, would you make one for me? I never learned how."

Steve obliged and passed the completed product around the front edge of their cells. "Nels, tell me something. How did my revolver get out to the Ring-Bar-X ranch?"

"That? It is very simple. Paulette took it from your holster while you were out of your room at the hotel, for fear you would try to prevent me from doing what I intended to do."

"Which was what?"

"It doesn't matter. I didn't do it." Nels made a nois that was almost a chuckle. "When I got there it was no necessary. I told Paulette that she must not keep you weapon any longer, because you might need it."

Steve did not think there was any point in tellin Nels how much trouble the leaving of the gun ha caused him so far. Besides, the noise of horses was no considerable.

Out of the barred window Steve could see cowboy riding toward the jail from various directions. As the arrived they dismounted. Some of them tied thei mounts to a long hitching rail; others simply droppe the bridle reins over the horses' heads onto the ground In either case the animals stood by.

From the front steps of the sheriff's office which oc cupied the forward part of the adobe came the sheriff' voice: "What you boys aimin' to do comin' into tow this time o' night?"

"Nothin'," said one of them. "We're just sort o waitin' for sunup. No law against parkin' the animile here, is they?"

"No, I guess not. Who all are you?"

"I'm Sam Seeley. Yonder's my brother Bill. Cousi Horace Seeley is just comin' in—he's tyin' his bronc ove there by George Seeley, the one with the rifle. And the—'

"Never mind. You're all Seeleys; is that it?"

"Most of us. Some are hands just ridin' for the Boxed S, but distant relations, a good many of 'em, at that."

"How come you all decided to pack up and pile into town at the same time and at this ungodly hour?"

"Jest a coincidence, I reckon."

"A coincidence by the name of Sadie," said Steve to Nels. "That rascal has turned out the countryside."

"It does look," concurred Nels, "as if the Dovers, if they should crave your company, would have to invite a lot of your relatives along too."

"I sincerely hope there won't be any trouble."

Outside on the front steps the sheriff was still talking to the early-morning visitors to town. "Ain't none of you boys packin' pocket hardware, are you?"

"Well, Sheriff, I guess we got a few miscellaneous popguns amongst us."

"That's illegal."

"We just brought 'em in to have 'em fixed. Most of 'em don't shoot straight. That locksmith down the street a piece is pretty handy repairin' six-guns."

"Oh, I guess it's all right then."

A momentary silence fell on the group of men and horses. Once in a while a hoof scraped on gravel or a bridle jingled, but that was all.

"I hear a car comin' wide open," said one of the visitors.

"Probably a tourist headin' for Chicago, mebbe," suggested another.

"Probably, only now I hear a couple of 'em comin' this way hell-bent."

"Seems to me there's more'n a couple, mebbe eight or nine."

"This is the best time for tourists to travel. Not apt to meet much traffic."

The conversation was all in a casual tone. The men who were talking, however, shifted their belts a little and moved slightly closer to the door of the sheriff's office.

Through the cell window Steve could see the rays from automobile headlights bobbing up and down and growing brighter as they approached.

Finally three or four cars came into view, slowed down, and swung around in front of the jail. Apparently others joined the assembly from another direction.

The sheriff's voice was first. "Anything I can do for you boys?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yeah," replied Hank Dover's unmistakable snar "Did you catch that killer?"

"I ain't rightly got no proof anybody's a killer," sai the sheriff, "but I have got a fella in here, named Boyc who give himself up awhile ago. Said he wanted to clai the protection of the law."

"That's the man we mean," growled Hank, "and we'v come for him."

"You got a writ or somethin', I suppose, authorizir me to surrender him?"

"We'll get that for you later, Sheriff. It'll all be legal.

Some more cars arrived.

Also a few more idle-looking young men on horseback The latter stopped across the street from the jail. Th men who came with Hank Dover were between them and the cowboys who had been first on the scene.

"Come on, Sheriff," Hank said harshly. "We wan Boyd now."

"Not now," replied Sheriff Carver blandly. "I'd rathe have the writ first."

"What the hell's a writ in this county? We've go thirty men here."

"Twenty-seven," corrected the sheriff. "I've beer countin' 'em. But I've got twenty-two deputies righ here and thirteen more across the street. Mebbe you hadn't noticed 'em. Seems to me like the easiest way to git Boyd would be to find the judge and have him give you one of them habeas-corpus things."

Hank seemed to be irresolute for a moment. But some of his men began to get back in the cars.

"All right," Hank conceded. "We'll be back in ten minutes."

Motors started noisily, and the cars moved away.

When they were entirely out of sight around the nex corner the sheriff beckoned to the cowboys on both side of the street.

"Come here and gather round, you good-for-nothin' sons of cow nurses. Everybody hold up his right hand and take the oath as a deputy."

"What?" demanded a new voice. "Did you lie to Hank Dover? Hadn't these men been sworn in when you used 'em to scare off our law-abiding fellow citizens of Outlaw County?"

"No, but I was just goin' to swear 'em when the fellow citizens above mentioned piled in here all full of patriotism and what not. And, by the way, what the Sam Hill are you doin' here, Judge?"

"Me?" The judge chuckled faintly. "I couldn't sleep. People keep interruptin' me over home."

"Who interrupted you?"

"The damn telephone girl for one."

"Wrong number, I suppose?"

"I guess that was what it was. Anyway, I thought I'd ask you to let me catch about forty winks in one of your cells. Nobody ought to bother me if you and your deputies don't let 'em."

"Okay, Judge. I'll fix you up. Just wait till I finish with these here guardeens of the peace. All you fellas, raise your right hands and say what I say; savvy?"

"You bet!"

The sheriff started with the words of the oath which came back at him from thirty-five hoarse throats like a magnified echo.

Inside the jail Nels Gunnarson said to Stephen Boyd, "I wouldn't be surprised if you did get a chance to stand trial after all."

Chapter Twenty-Two: GIRL MEETS DADDY

THE CORONER'S INQUEST WAS SET for the second day following.

That gave Nels and Steve a lazy forty-eight hours and

more in jail. Nels was being held at the request of the authorities until a representative from the state institution for the criminally insane could be sent for him. When the official turned up late in the afternoon of the day after Phoebe's death he proved to be one of Nels's best friends among the members of the staff, a Dr. Simon Oliver.

Naturally Steve in the next cell heard all the conversation which took place between them.

"Could you arrange it, Doctor," Nels requested, "for us to stay over until after the funeral of my ex-wife? I'd like to attend that and, besides, I might have something to say at the coroner's inquest which would clear things up."

"I can arrange it all right, Nels," the doctor said, "but I don't think your testimony will have any weight with a coroner or a judge. You have no legal status. After all, you are a nut, you know."

They both laughed. Apparently the official and the patient were on terms of equality, except for the slight difference that one worked for the commonwealth and the other was merely its unwilling guest.

"I think they'll listen to me," Nels assured his friend and custodian. "Thanks for giving me the chance."

"Hell," said the physician-official, "I'm glad to do anything I can for you outside of giving you a passkey to the gates of our mutual home, and you don't seem to need a key to get out with. The only real reason for keeping you around is that I'd miss your friendship if you were gone."

That was strange talk between a prisoner and his keeper. Steve commented on it after Dr. Oliver had departed.

"He's a great scientist," Nels said, "as well as one of the most humane officials in our alma mater. He studies during most of his spare time, keeps right up to the

minute on his subject. He lets me read his books and discusses them with me. I've learned more from him about how the human mind operates than I could have gotten from any university postgraduate course in psychology that is being given anywhere in this country."

Nels had another visitor that afternoon—Joan.

Steve did not see the actual meeting when the girl was admitted to the adjoining cell, but he could sense the emotional release that came to both father and daughter. It was easy to imagine the gentle, protective sweep of Nels's long arms as he folded her small body close to his heart.

"It seems to me," said Nels in a matter-of-fact tone, "that you are a very nice-looking girl, considering what a homely brat you were when I saw you last, fifteen years ago."

Joan answered with a funny little laugh—half appreciation and half puzzlement. "I thought," she said, "that you were a poet."

"You mean you expected me to greet you in verse and to roll on the floor in a rhapsodic frenzy? Darling, we union poets have to save our best stuff for the public. Don't you like me as I am?"

"Daddy," she said, and that was where she stopped. Steve knew why. Using the old and universal childhood name for a beloved parent had released the tears that she had intended not to shed.

"I thought," declared Nels, "that I remembered you as one of those stoic children who never cried."

"I am a stoic," sobbed Joan. "And I'm not crying. This is hay fever or something."

"Then answer my question: do you think I'm all right, even if I'm just a sort of a W.P.A. versifier and not a coloratura poet?"

"I adore you, Mr. Gunnarson." She paused. "There, I can call you that without having it bring on my dread

malady. The last couple of days have been a little strenuous. And now that Mother—"

Her father interrupted: "You don't have to talk about it if it hurts."

"No, Daddy, it's all right. I did it, didn't I? Called you Daddy, I mean. It's wonderful to be able to, even here in this forbidding bastille. But I'd like to tell you about Mother. She was really all right, even if she was a little extravagant in the matter of husbands. Don't be bitter or sorry about her. The thing that made her as she was had nothing to do with her character. It was simply that she didn't care. I don't think she even minds very much being dead."

"I know, Joan, but how you could figure that out, young as you are, I can't imagine."

"Could it be, do you think, because I am the daughter of a very understanding man?" Silence. "It's comfortable and reassuring here on your shoulder. Your lips are touching my hair, aren't they? Do you suppose, Mr. Gunnarson, my dear, that we are both a little c-c-crazy, or is it only me?" Nothing more for a moment. Then, "Dammit, I did it again."

Steve felt a trifle embarrassed. He coughed slightly as a reminder of his presence.

Joan laughed. "Yes, Steve, I know you're there. But it doesn't matter." Then she addressed her father. "Mr. Gunnarson, I've only known Steve since yesterday, and he's a Seeley—and I suppose a lot of other things are wrong with him besides—and yet I call him by his first name and I trust him more than anyone I know except you. How do you account for that?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Joan, there's a book published by a New York firm and written by my friend, Doctor Simon Oliver, the eminent psychologist, which probably explains that phenomenon better than I could."

"Oh!"

The outer door of the jail, which led into the sheriff's office, opened noisily.

Sheriff Carver shouted out, "Jimmie Baxter's here, Joan."

"Will you please send him in, Sheriff? I'd like to have him meet Father." Then Joan said to Nels, "Jimmie's a cousin. He's my best friend around here."

Steve got a slantwise view of Jimmie as he entered and stood outside of Nels Gunnarson's cell, his faded Stetson in one hand and in the other a rosette of blue ribbon with gold letters printed on the dangling ends. A deputy unlocked Gunnarson's cell, and Jimmie went in out of Steve's sight.

After more or less conventional greetings Nels asked Jimmie about his blue satin bouquet.

"It's Joan's. Her steer, Pedro, just won a first in the fat-stock show. I thought I'd bring it right to her so that she wouldn't feel that every last darn thing in the world had gone wrong. Winning a blue ribbon isn't so much, but—"

"Yes, it is, Jimmie," Joan assured him with infinite and gentle tact. "Until today it was the most important thing in my life. Of course now—"

"I understand."

"I knew you would. Who handled Pedro in the ring?"

"I did," Jimmie confessed. "I didn't think you'd mind."

She laughed without bothering to confirm his belief. "You're always on hand when anybody needs you, aren't you, Jimmie?"

"Well," Jimmie said, and Steve in imagination could just see his old Stetson turning round and round in his embarrassed hands, "I always aim to be on hand when *you* need me, Joan."

"Now there's a man who really talks like a poet," declared Gunnarson. "I'd forgotten, but I think that

when I was his age I used to be able to bend language around into pretzels like that."

"Don't pay any attention to the doddering old gentleman in the corner, Jimmie. I think he likes to tease people."

"I was thinking," continued her father, "that Sir Lancelot never made a nicer remark to Guinevere."

"Guinevere? Lancelot?" repeated Joan. "But wasn't Guinevere married to King Arthur?"

"I kinda forget—so did Guinevere occasionally."

"Tell me, Jimmie," Joan asked more seriously, "did Pedro act all right?"

"You mean alert and everything? Yeah. He seemed to be all well from his sleeping-sickness—whatever it was. Doc Blaufus looked in at the stable this morning, and he couldn't find anything wrong."

"Did the Ring-Bar-X win anything else?"

"Well, no, ma'am. Your uncle, he wasn't there to put in any of the other entries. I didn't dare do it for him, but I stuck Pedro in because he was yours."

When Jimmie had gone outside to wait in the ranch station wagon for Joan, to take her home, Gunnarson said to his daughter, "Very obviously, my child, you are the woman in that young man's life. Is he, by any chance, the man in yours?"

"No, nothing like that. I told you that he is a cousin."

"Cousins sometimes—"

"I know, but not in families where there is a mental—"

Nels interrupted her: "You don't really believe that applies to you, do you?"

"It doesn't matter, Daddy." She was genuinely distressed. "Whatever you are I want to be that too. You're all I've got now, all I've ever had, really. Mother loved me in her way, but life was so full of things for her to do that I never got very well acquainted with her. I

know you better right now than I ever knew Mother." She paused a moment and then went on: "If you and I could only go somewhere together we could take care of each other."

"Listen, you little fool"—Steve suspected that Gunnarson was shaking her—"who has been filling you up with the idea of hereditary insanity?"

"Nobody, really. Of course, I've known what Uncle Henry has said to other people, but most of my knowledge comes from books I've read on the subject. There is an especially authoritative one by your own friend, Doctor Simon Oliver. He is against you, you know, on the question of hereditary and mental abnormality."

"I see. And you've been living all your childhood in that unhealthy castle, haunted by ghosts of your own contriving? I guess it's about time I took a hand in things. I thought your mother would save you from that."

"How?"

"That's what I wonder—how? I begin to understand one of the things that must have bothered her all these years."

When Joan had gone away, carrying what comforting assurances her father had been able to manufacture for her, Gunnarson requested Steve to roll him a cigarette.

"I have to think," he explained. "You heard what Joan said?"

"Yes, sir," Steve admitted. "I was sorry to listen but I couldn't help it."

"That's all right. But do you see what I've got to do? I've got to prove that I'm not insane now and never have been insane, or she may really become a mental case just from brooding on the future. And in order to do that—" Gunnarson paused.

But Steve finished his sentence: "—you've got to take the rap for killing Rance Seeley."

Chapter Twenty-Three: AN EARFUL FOR THE CORONER

THE INQUEST, beginning the next morning, was held in the county courthouse. That was out of deference to the fact that it was practically a social event, and all the principal people felt obliged to attend. This was the first time in Outlaw County that a woman, either Dover or Seeley, had got in the way of a bullet even by accident. There wasn't room for the crowd anywhere else except in the courthouse. Actually there wasn't enough room there either, but nearly everyone managed to jam his body in some way.

About a third of the spectators were sheriff's deputies. Sheriff Carver thought that would be just about the right proportion to insure order among the other two-thirds.

Another group consisted of newspaper writers from the Coast. Phoebe Dover was a big shot in the literary world, and her death, especially if it was murder, was important news. Scott Seeley was there, representing not only the Outlaw *Post* but one of the national wire services as well.

Sears was a deputy. Skippy McGinn and Soso were there in his charge, having been detained as material witnesses, much to Soso's indignation. Skippy seemed not to care.

A bewildered gentleman who took no part in the proceedings and who sat uncomfortably with the Dover representatives turned out to be George Woodstock, the man who would have been Phoebe's husband if she had lived.

He had arrived the day before, in the morning, only a few hours after Phoebe's death. Not knowing anyone in the family except his deceased fiancée, who had actually died before her divorce from Skippy was final,

made his situation peculiarly embarrassing and puzzling.

Mr. Woodstock was a well-groomed, not very athletic-looking individual of the executive type, nobody's fool in his own domain, but fearfully out of place in that hot, stuffy courtroom. He was almost the only man in the entire building who wore a coat.

A special chair had been fixed up near the coroner's table, facing it. John Dover sat there. He moved very little, but he kept his cold blue eyes on Steve most of the time. Once in a great while a puzzled look replaced the implacable hatred in his eyes—but only for a moment.

Paulette Dubois was right down in front, too, in the dual capacity of newspaper feature writer and witness. Before the proceedings began she leaned over toward Steve and said, "Thanks for covering me with my boss. Next time I make the headlines myself I'll give you first crack at the story."

Steve grinned. "You might get into this one in my place before the finish."

Paulette pretended that she was not startled, but she was. "What could you possibly mean by that?"

"You were prowling around the ranch house, you know. And you had a motive."

"A motive?" Paulette's laugh was too nervous. "Why, Steve, I was Phoebe's best friend!"

"And she stole the man you loved away from you." Steve reminded her.

"That was a lifetime ago."

"But you're still in love with him."

Paulette was in more of a panic from that statement than from the accusation of possible homicide. "You won't tell him, will you, Steve? Please."

"No, of course not." He paused. "I'll let you do it."

This had all been said in an undertone. There was so much noisy conversation among the spectators that no one could overhear any particular exchange of remarks.

To understand even anyone sitting alongside was largely a matter of lip reading.

The coroner thumped loud and long for order. Eventually he got it.

The jury, which had already viewed the remains in Pitman's Homelike Funeral Parlors across the street, was instructed in the limitations of the verdict they were supposed to bring in.

"We're not tryin' anybody for anything at this inquest," concluded Dr. Waldo Botts, the county officer. "All you've got to do is say whether you think the deceased died a natural death, an accidental death, or, if she was killed, whether she did it herself or was killed by somebody else. If you decide she was murdered and there is any reasonable evidence that some particular party did it, you may recommend that he, she, or they be held for trial. That's all you have to do.

"As county coroner I will myself depose that Phoebe Dover died from a wound inflicted by a .38-caliber bullet. Death was probably instantaneous, as she was hit in the heart. That's all I know up to now—at least officially.

"We are assembled here to find out what we can from witnesses who were in the house or on the grounds of the Ring-Bar-X ranch when the tragedy occurred. I'll do most of the interrogatin' myself, but if there is anything you think I've overlooked, you members of the jury can stick in a question once in a while. But see you don't make nuisances of yourselves.

"I think everybody is here." He looked around the hall. "Mr. Henry Dover, sit in this chair near the table and tell us what you know about the death of your sister, Phoebe Dover."

Hank's call apparently came earlier than he had expected. He was caught with an absolutely fresh bite of plug tobacco in his teeth. He had to get rid of it before

he took the stand. He tried for a goal in a cuspidor near the table but missed.

Hank testified that he was in his own bedroom adjoining that of his father on the night of his sister's demise. He heard a shot, he said, and looked out toward his sister's window which was the only one in that wing in which there was a light. Phoebe was leaning out of the window, apparently struggling to get away from a man who was holding her in his arms. The man in the case, as Hank discovered a few moments later when he entered her room and found Phoebe dead, was Stephen Boyd.

Hank further testified briefly to the fact that Steve had a six-gun in his belt holster with one empty cartridge shell in it. The cartridges which were left in the gun were of the same caliber as the one which had killed his sister.

The coroner verified this last statement by indicating Steve's revolver which lay on his table.

Joan, sitting next to her father, who in turn was ostentatiously handcuffed to a deputy, rose and addressed the coroner.

"Doctor Botts," she said, "I can testify that the gun on your desk had only five loaded cartridges in it earlier in the same evening that my mother—"

"Sit down!" commanded Hank. Several others growled a second to his order.

Coroner Botts himself said, "Miss Joan, I have here on my desk an injunction from the county court, ordering me to bar you from testifying in this case on the grounds that you are under observation for hereditary insanity. I'm terribly sorry—"

Joan stood uncertainly. "I—I—I don't know what to say."

"You ain't allowed to say anything," said Hank. "Sit down."

Joan was bewildered. She shot a look of appeal at her father. He smiled at her reassuringly as he nudged Dr. Oliver, who was sitting beside him.

The latter rose and attracted the coroner's attention by addressing him. "Doctor Botts, may I speak to you and this jury for a moment?"

"What about?" the coroner asked suspiciously. "No matter what you say I'm going to obey this restraining order."

"Certainly. That is clearly your duty. First of all I should like to introduce myself."

"Ain't necessary, Doctor Oliver. Everybody in town knows who you are and why you came here."

"Thank you."

"This is a small town," Coroner Botts explained. "Folks talk a good deal about a stranger."

"I see." Dr. Oliver paused a moment to make sure that he had the attention of the jury. "Then you gentlemen know that I am an alienist in the employ of the state. As such I am qualified to testify as to the sanity of any person whom I have examined and have had under observation for any considerable length of time. I cannot make any statement one way or the other about Miss Joan Gunnarson because I neither know her well nor have I ever examined her for symptoms of mental instability.

"But I am in a position to take an oath as to the exact condition of her father, Mr. Nels Gunnarson. He has actually been under strict observation for a period of years and has been frequently tested by me for aberrations from the normal. Gentlemen, as the result of that long period of observation and the technical tests which I have given him I can swear positively that Nels Gunnarson is an absolutely sane man and as such is qualified to bear witness at this inquest or at any subsequent court proceedings. I would like to ask you to let him

tell his story."

Coroner Botts shifted uneasily in his chair. He could not remember any precedent for anything like the situation which confronted him. So far as he knew there never had been a case where an alienist vouched for the sanity of a man who had been supposedly criminally deranged for years. Dr. Botts was not a lawyer, and he had lived all his life in a sparsely settled part of the country where abstruse tangles of justice did not often complicate the simple duties of the elected officers. Coroners heretofore had only dealt with accidents, shootings, and stabbings, violence in its more understandable forms.

Because he did not really know what to do and because Dr. Oliver was a very plausible and convincing man, Dr. Botts let him get away with what he feared might be a considerable infraction of the statutes of the fair state of Arizona.

Nels Gunnarson was released from his handcuffs and allowed to take the stand.

He crossed one long leg over the other knee in the chair which had recently been vacated by Hank Dover, his brother-in-law once removed (legally).

Coroner Botts issued a last warning. "You understand, don't you, Mr. Gunnarson, that acknowledging your complete sanity in order to testify in this case is just the same as pleading guilty to the charge of murdering Rance Seeley?"

"Killing Rance Seeley, you mean, Mr. Coroner," Nels corrected. "Unless customs have changed considerably since I was here last, shooting a Seeley isn't considered murder in this county."

There was enough applause after that remark to cause the coroner a lot of trouble in quieting things down. "Don't do that," he ruled, "or I'll expel all spectators."

The spectators he mentioned laughed at that threat.

Everybody knew that no one, unless it was a United States marshal with an army of subordinates, could clear that hall.

But Nels, when he spoke again in his slow, melodic voice, quieted the crowd as it focused on what he was saying. "If you are willing, Doctor Botts and gentlemen of the coroner's jury, I'll tell my story in my own way. I shall have to cover some events which took place several years ago, but if I take a considerable amount of the time of this court of inquiry I believe it will, in the end, be justified by the fact that my testimony may eliminate the necessity for anyone else to say anything at all.

"First let me specify that it is essential that Mr. John Dover should hear everything which I have to say. Because of his deafness and a fixed aversion to the wearing of any of the modern mechanical aids to hearing, I have asked the telephone company to set up a temporary local telephone connection between this desk and his seat. With your permission, Mr. Coroner, I will ask one of the sheriff's deputies sitting near the window to pass in the two instruments which are ready outside."

The interest of the crowd was now really aroused. The coroner himself would not have stopped Nels at that point any more than he would have interrupted a clever magician about to perform a mystifying trick.

Sears Seeley, who was the deputy sitting near the open window (on purpose), reached out and took in two pieces of apparatus attached to trailing insulated wire cords. One, which was a regular desk telephone but without the receiver, he set up on the coroner's table. The other, which was a switchboard operator's clamp-on headpiece, he gave to Joan with the request that she put it on her grandfather's head. For a moment it looked as if it would be much simpler to rope and hog-tie a steer, because the old man shied away from the headpiece as if it were part of an electric chair. Joan persuaded him to

try it, however, by explaining that Nels was going to speak through it to tell him what had happened to Phoebe.

John Dover capitulated with the remark, "All right. I'll talk to Nels. I never held anything much against Nels, exceptin' he never had enough gumption to be husband to Phoebe."

He had the headset on by that time. "Thank you, Mr. Dover," said Nels, and the old man heard it so plainly he smiled—a frosty smile, but nevertheless a twitch of the mouth which in him expressed appreciation.

"Maybe I'll get me one of them things after all," he said.

"What this amounts to," Nels said to the crowd, "is a primitive loud-speaker system." Then he spoke directly into the telephone.

"When I came to this state over twenty years ago my object was, like that of so many other visitors at that time, to recover my health. I met Phoebe Dover through a mutual friend." He bowed slightly toward Paulette. "She attracted me more than any woman I had ever met. I did not need to tell her that because she had pretty much the same effect on everybody. Men broke their promises and forsook their families if she showed them the least favor. Even—"

"Wait a minute, Nels!" It was the old man who interrupted querulously. "We shouldn't ought to have to go into all this. Phoebe's dead and—"

"—and I'm going to tell how she died. To make that clear I have to tell all I know about Phoebe. You know that what I say is the truth, because you yourself idolized your daughter. In your eyes she could do no wrong and, because of her, you made life a constant burden to your son Henry, who was your first born. You made him, who should have been your right hand, merely an embittered slave to her whims. In your eyes no man was good enough

to be Phoebe's husband; you wanted to keep her always a little girl, the child who worshiped you in return for the wealth of affection you lavished upon her. Isn't that right?"

The old man nodded. "Yes. But now she's gone." A tear rolled down his old, white, bristly cheek.

Nels continued: "You had one other passion in your life, a consuming hatred of the Seeley family. I need not go into that. You inherited it from your father before you, and it was nourished in gunpowder and bullets. Of the two emotions it was the more natural, because it was a part of the soil of the Old West.

"When you found that your daughter was in love with a Seeley your heart nearly burned up inside of you from the agony of contemplating what lay ahead. For any man to take her from you was bad enough, but for a Seeley—"

There was a low growl from a group of the spectators sitting apart. They were the Dover clan.

"I had best hasten over that part of the story," Nels went on. "You succeeded in averting the disaster of a marriage between your family and that of your ancient enemy. As the lesser of two evils you permitted Phoebe to marry me. You thought I would take less of her away from you than anyone else. You were right. I took very nearly nothing. I was never higher than third in her thoughts. In spite of her heartbreak over the ending of her romance with Rance Seeley she never ceased to be your devoted daughter. She repaid you well for what you had done for her as a child. She spoiled you as you had spoiled her. Only, in a way, it was worse for you than it ever had been for her. She, as she grew up, had added some outside preoccupations, such as her writing, her occasional travels, even her futile marriages to men whom she hopefully thought might be amusing. But you, as you grew older, lost all your other interests. They fell away from you—friends, the management of your prop-

erty, the respect of your son, everything. You lived only insofar as you were a part of Phoebe's life. Now that she is dead you, too, are dead." With that fearful pronouncement Nels paused a moment then said, "Am I right?"

"Yes."

"And you do not care now what happens?"

"No."

"Then the truth as I shall tell it cannot hurt you.

"As I said, I married your daughter Phoebe. A child was born to us, my daughter Joan. Then Rance Seeley came back to Outlaw. It was his home. He thought that time had healed the wounds. I guess we all thought that. Then he saw Phoebe and they both knew that nothing had changed. I saw them when they met on the street here in Outlaw and I knew too.

"I knew it so definitely that it made me sick at heart. It was not only finding out that my wife loved another man but, more than that, the realization that, loving him, she had made the heartbreaking mistake of marrying someone else. The three of us, Phoebe, Rance, and I, were in a tragic tangle, even if everyone else had let us alone.

"But you didn't let us alone. The news of Rance Seeley's return and the fact that Phoebe had met him in town and talked to him for five minutes spread all over the county. You heard it before I got home that night. Remember how you gave me your revolver and told me to shoot to kill if he ever spoke to her again? You gave me quite a lecture on the way men avenge their women here in this county. I had heard of such things before, but the reality was like a strange nightmare. I took your gun and your advice and rode away on one of your horses to think things over. Perhaps I never intended to come back. It doesn't matter whether I meant to return or not. I was brought back anyway—by the sheriff.

"Rance Seeley had been shot to death, and I was

accused of killing him!

"It amused me, that accusation. I have never fired a gun of any sort in my life. But I was carrying a gun and I was apparently running away.

"What actually happened—who really shot Rance Seeley when he climbed to your daughter's window that night—I do not know, although I have a reasonably clear suspicion which I expect to explain, but my guilt was so obviously the correct answer that no one thought of any other. I was the outraged husband; my wife's lover was a member of a family at odds with the one to which I belonged, at least by marriage. There was no other conclusion which could be drawn by a public which lived by simple motives and direct action.

"The strangest result of all was that I was suddenly a hero to the Dover family. To you and your kin I had justified my existence by killing an enemy. True, I was in the toils of the law, but powerful machinery began to grind to get me out. The name Dover is magic in this state.

"The scheme which saved my neck was born, I think, in the fertile brain of my wife Phoebe. To her life was always one vast plot, and she liked to move the characters about in dramatic patterns even when—as in this case—her own emotions were most deeply involved.

"You know how I escaped the gallows—hanging was the legal method of execution in this state at that time—by a plea of guilty and the faked-up evidence of emotional insanity. I didn't care, but you said that you did not want to give the Seeleys the satisfaction of seeing a member of your family swinging from the gallows.

"The plan, as it was originally presented to me, was that I would spend a few months under observation in the state institution for the criminally insane and then be released. I agreed to the plan because I believed that it would prevent open warfare between the Dovers and

the Seeleys and at the same time protect the actual killer who had acted in accordance with the code of the country to protect the family honor.

"I waited in prison fifteen years. Perhaps Phoebe forgot the romantic plot which involved me as the modern man in the iron mask. Maybe it was more convenient to have me confined than bobbing up inconveniently once in a while. She always was a ruthless person and as blithely disregarded the rights of others as you do yourself, especially if those rights interfered with her own convenience. It is one of the attributes of tyranny. She was a tyrant—you still are. I knew too much; I still know too much. It saved you and Phoebe a lot of troublesome explanations if I remained in confinement.

"Actually I did not mind my incarceration at all. I was well cared for. I had no worries. I was free to study and write.

"But one day I ran across a paragraph in Phoebe's latest book, *Ringside Wife,* a paragraph which made me think. I will recite that paragraph to you."

"I protest, Mr. Coroner." Skippy was on his feet, half angry, half humiliated.

Nels regarded him pityingly. "The paragraph I refer to, Mr. McGinn, unlike most of the rest of the novel, has nothing whatever to do with your private and intimate life."

Skippy allowed himself to be pulled back into his seat by Soso who growled, "Don't be so impestuous, Skip. Now everybody will be readin' that story. They'll be laughin' at you every time you step into the ring."

Nels went back to where he was when Skippy interrupted. Interest among the spectators tightened up. There was no question now that, whether they believed in Nels Gunnarson's guilt or innocence, they were deeply interested in his story.

A ripple of intensified attention ran through the audi-

ence, ending as it always does, in a sharp intake of breath.

"The paragraph from *Ringside Wife* to which I have referred runs as follows:

"There comes a time in the affairs of men, and sometimes of women, too, when duty to an older generation is automatically superseded by duty to a younger generation. In other words, a mother or father standing midway between his own parents and his children must, in the event of necessity or choice, do the thing which is best for the latter, no matter who gets hurt.

"That is the end of the paragraph. The fact that it is significant has just been emphasized to you by the concern of Phoebe Dover's most recent husband over having me quote from her book. All of us who knew her well are painfully aware that she wrote almost exclusively from her own experience.

"My inference, therefore, from the lines I have just recalled to your memories was that Phoebe had herself reached the crossroads to which she refers—that she had faced the problem of which was her greatest duty—to you, John Dover, her father, or to Joan, her daughter.

"Apparently to her mind there was a conflict of interests, and she definitely feared that some harm might come to her daughter, who, as it happens, is also my child. I tried to figure out what that danger could be but I had no success. I knew there must be some factor I had overlooked. So I decided to come here and find out what it was.

"I had little difficulty in escaping from confinement. All of the officials at Phoenix knew that I was in reality only a political prisoner, and they regarded me more as a member of the staff than one of the inmates. The first step in my escape was merely to walk out. After the hue and cry was raised I had to proceed more carefully, but actually I had very little trouble making my way to the city of Outlaw.

"As soon as I arrived I began making a few inquiries from people who did not know me—strangers who have come to this locality since I left—and it didn't take me long to discover the factor I had overlooked in my diagnosis of the problem which my ex-wife was trying to solve.

"The element which I had left out of my calculations was the fact that my daughter had grown up, and that now since she is old enough to understand she is obsessed by the fear of hereditary insanity. That fear has been fostered, rather clumsily, I think, by her uncle, Mr. Henry Dover. Sit down, Mr. Dover! You're directly in range of the six-guns in the hands of the man by the window. Let's avoid bloodshed."

Hank sat down. Sears put away his two revolvers. The coroner puffed up with momentary indignation, preparing to say something, but subsided because he couldn't think of what it was.

Nels continued: "I found that rumors of my daughter's supposedly unbalanced condition had been spread all over the countryside. You have heard them. I don't need to prove my statement.

"A thing like that seemed like a cowardly attack, and at first I could not see the reason for it. Then it dawned on me that my daughter Joan, the object of this persecution, was probably the heir to the principal Dover financial interests which, even in my time, were vested in the hands of the favorite child of the house, Phoebe Dover. This I have since discovered to be absolutely correct. Joan inherits everything—unless, gentlemen, she should happen to be adjudged insane. Phoebe knew as well as I that such a thing would not be very hard to arrange, because it had already happened to me.

"That, then, is the problem which faced Phoebe Dover. She knew what she had to do; she had to prove that I was entirely sane and always had been, even at the time

I was supposed to have killed Rance Seeley. But her courage must have failed her after she wrote that passage in her book. My own personal conclusion is that the reason she did not go through with her determination to tell the truth was because it involved naming the real killer of Rance Seeley.

"On the night when she herself was killed I went out to the Ring-Bar-X ranch to force her to tell what she had heretofore concealed. Before I could get a chance to interview her alone her life was ended. I was not far from her window when the shot was fired which pierced her heart. No, I did not pull the trigger myself, but by a singular coincidence, which seems as if it might have been arranged by the mighty final solver of puzzles himself, the weapon from which I believe the bullet was fired fell into my hands.

"The weapon to which I refer was casually given to me to hold for a few moments. Events occurred so rapidly that later, when I was arrested by Sheriff Carver, the gun was still in my possession. But meanwhile I had had time to examine it and I called the sheriff's attention to the condition of the gun when he received it.

"I will now ask the sheriff to produce the weapon to which I refer and testify that it is now exactly as it was when it was given into his custody."

Sheriff Carver beckoned to a deputy at the rear door. The deputy came forward with an old long-barreled, single-shot rifle which he laid on the table.

"That is the gun," said Sheriff Carver. "It had been fired when I received it. The ammunition which fits it is the same caliber as that of the bullet which was found in the body of the deceased. As the sheriff of Outlaw County I hereby request Coroner Botts to make inquiry as to whether anyone recognizes this rifle."

Coroner Botts, whose own curiosity was now at the boiling point, asked the question as requested.

No one answered. There was an uneasy movement among the spectators, but that could be attributed to the momentary relaxation of the strain of listening to Nels Gunnarson's story.

"What's goin' on here?" John Dover asked impatiently. "Nels, you tell me through this dingus what that old fool, Sheriff Carver, and that numskull, Doc Botts, were talkin' about. I can't hear anybody but you."

"The coroner," Nels said patiently, "asked if anyone recognized that rifle there on the table."

"Oh, everybody knows that's my rifle. Why didn't somebody speak up?"

A ripple of protest ran through the solid segment of the Dover family seated around the patriarch.

Nels put his hand over the mouthpiece and spoke imperatively, "Wait, gentlemen. Your impulse does you credit, but remember, please, he doesn't care what happens to him. Neither do I care what happens to me. We are both of us now concerned only with the future of an entirely innocent bystander who is the only one who can be hurt now by anything. I refer to my daughter, Joan Gunnarson, who is also Mr. Dover's granddaughter. Permit me to ask him another question."

No one seemed willing to take on his own shoulders the duty of interfering.

Nels spoke into the mouthpiece: "Mr. Dover, when did you last fire that rifle?"

"It was the night I saw Rance Seeley outside of Phoebe's window. I shot him because you wasn't there to do it."

Nels again quieted the murmurs of protest. "We've got to get this straight. Don't interfere now." To Dover he said, "Which time do you mean?"

"I mean both times," the old man replied testily. "I must have missed him the first time—that was years ago—'cause he came back the other night. I saw him plain

from my window. I couldn't sleep. I aimed more careful that time so I wouldn't miss again."

Silence.

No one even moved.

The old man was the first to speak. He removed the earphones and threw them on the floor. "I'm tired. I've heard too much." He turned to Joan, who took his hands. It seemed to be what he wanted. "Take me home, girl. I want to go home."

Joan looked inquiringly at the coroner.

"Yes, take him away," he told her.

When they were gone the coroner said to Nels, "Was that what you expected to prove?"

Nels shook his head. "No, it's much more. Doctor Oliver," he appealed to his friend, "can you untangle this confusion?"

"Yes, with Doctor Botts's permission I think I can."

Dr. Botts gave his permission.

"With very elderly persons," Dr. Oliver explained, "there is apt to be a dislocation of time values. That is why they remember events of long ago more clearly than those of yesterday. It does not mean that there is any mental derangement, but merely that they project themselves back into a perhaps more interesting period in their lives and apparently forget the things that have happened since.

"Now in the case of Mr. Dover, who has just left this inquest, he is not quite certain which events took place fifteen years ago, when he actually shot and killed a certain Mr. Seeley under the impression that he was defending his daughter from dishonor, and which occurred only night before last, when he thought he saw the hated Mr. Seeley again enacting the same romantic episode which he had seen once before. All that seems to be reasonably clear is that in both cases he fired his rifle at the supposed intruder.

"His greatest confusion, however, lies in his feeling that it was when he shot at Mr. Seeley the first time that he missed. Actually it was night before last that he failed to hit what he was aiming at and instead—"

"He killed my wife?" asked Skippy incredulously.

"I think so," replied Dr. Oliver.

Skippy was struggling to his feet. "Let me find him!"

Soso and one of the deputies forced Skippy back into his seat.

The coroner rapped for order and got it. He was in the driver's seat once more.

"Gentlemen of the jury, we have heard a very scientific tale. It may be true or it may be a fancy yarn spun to throw us off the real scent which lies plain before our noses. If we believe this cock-and-bull story it is your duty to recommend that Mr. John Dover, a highly respected citizen of this county, be arrested and held on the charge of accidentally shooting his daughter, Phoebe Dover." He paused.

"Ah, politics rears its muddled head," murmured Steve across the intervening space to Paulette. "Doctor Botts must be up for re-election, and he needs the Dover vote."

"Silence!" ordered the coroner, who had not understood Steve's remark but sensed that it was of a derogatory nature. "Gentlemen of the coroner's jury, do you wish to hear more, or is it your pleasure to retire and consider a verdict?"

"I think mebbe they better hear something a little bit more, I guess." That was an unmistakable voice from the back of the hall.

Coroner Botts looked up a little sourly, as is befitting a physician when he addresses a veterinary. "What do you mean, Blaufus? Have you any evidence that has any bearing on this case?"

"After all," said the old veterinary mildly, "it says '*Doctor* Blaufus' on the diploma I got on the wall from

my office. But never mind, Doctor Botts. More important it is what is in the head than what is on the name plate on the door. Yes, Doctor Botts, I have something that I should say."

"What?"

Dr. Blaufus was not requested to take the witness chair. He spoke from where he stood.

"In my opinion, which I think to myself is sometimes pretty good, the lady who died night before last was killed by something that was not a bullet."

"Now, Blaufus—er—Doctor Blaufus, if you prefer—don't be absurd. How can you make such a statement when I have already said there was a bullet in her heart?"

"Yes, sir, there was it a bullet in the heart all right. I admit you could probably find also a thing like that. But it came there afterward. She was already before that dead. You see, in my business which is not maybe so scientific, but anyway we get lots of practice, we know that when a live animal is shot it bleeds much, but if it is first dead before shooting then the blood is only a little; because why?—it is not moving around in the veins and arteries. It must be the same with human people."

"Was there no blood from the wound in the cardiac region of the deceased?"

"A very small quantity only."

"How do you know?"

"I was there when the trouble is happen. My car he has broke down, and my neighbor, Mr. Washington Dover, is taking me home. We stop at Ring-Bar-X ranch for a little eating and drinking, like everybody that goes by that way. When I hear something is wrong with Miss Phoebe I go to her to help. She is dead. But there is only a few drops of blood."

"Probably there was an internal hemorrhage."

"No," the veterinary denied stoutly. "If that is so then I think there will be no blood outside at all."

The coroner was plainly exasperated. "Are you suggesting that I perform an autopsy?"

"Yes, it is necessary before a true verdict can be given."

"What," asked the coroner sarcastically, "do you think we are apt to find in the lady besides a bullet hole?"

"Poison," replied Dr. Blaufus. "Quite a lot of poison. She died quick."

Chapter Twenty-Four: SENSATION IN COURT

DR. BLAUFUS WAS VERY WELL LIKED in Outlaw County. Most of the members of the coroner's jury were friends and clients of his. When he told them something was wrong they were inclined to pay attention.

So in this case they backed up his demand for an autopsy. So many unexpected things had developed already that the introduction of one additional startling theory did not seem any more confusing. No one quite knew where he stood anyway.

The coroner, much against his inclination, announced that he would adjourn the inquest until he had completed an examination of the late Phoebe Dover's digestive and circulatory tract.

Some of the spectators had already left the hall when the precipitate arrival of a rather heavy and very determined middle-aged man who seemed to want to get in jammed the only exit for a moment. Then partly because of natural curiosity about any stranger and partly because they would have been knocked flat if they had done otherwise, the native residents of Outlaw gave way and made a passage for the importunate newcomer.

He was an Easterner—you could tell that even before he opened his mouth and let fall pearls that had been nurtured at Harvard. The stamp of New York was on him, too, a nervousness of manner coupled with an assurance that he would get service no matter what. New

York, too, had claimed most of his hair and tinged the remaining fringe an ash gray. But he didn't care about the color or the amount of his hair or the fact that his well-made suit was somewhat wrinkled and dusty.

Obviously he was a man above trifles. The world was his oyster. When he snapped his fingers—and you sensed that he did snap his fingers, and fairly often, too—he expected someone to sit up and speak, come to heel, or roll over and play dead.

"Are you," he said, fixing Dr. Botts with his eye as he came toward the table, "the coroner of Outlaw County?"

Dr. Botts recognized the voice of authority and acknowledged his identity.

"I'm David Worth Brennan," the big man announced, putting a large, worn briefcase on the table and sitting down in the empty witness chair.

"Yes, Mr. Brennan."

"Editor of the *Woman's Fireside Review*, in case you don't know who I am. Your wife probably does anyway."

The editor talked so fast that he covered all questions you could possibly ask before you had time to think them up.

"Flew in by plane from New York as soon as I got this." He had unfastened his briefcase and now took out a manuscript envelope which looked familiar to at least two persons near the table. Paulette Dubois and Stephen Boyd had last seen it on Phoebe Dover's desk the night she was killed.

"It's the final installment of a serial by Phoebe Dover. We're publishing it. Started in July—supposed to finish with the December issue. But you people out here killed her. What's the idea? One of our principal writers. Need her. Why couldn't you pick on somebody who wasn't so well known? Damn nuisance."

Coroner Botts reminded Editor Brennan that death seldom withholds its sting, even to suit the convenience

of the most mighty.

"No, I suppose not. Well, then, where is this brother of hers?"

"Her brother? Henry Dover?" The coroner looked around the room. "Henry Dover, step up! Anyway, he was here a minute or so ago. What did you want of him?"

"I don't want him," Brennan replied testily, "but you do. He's the man who killed my biggest circulation getter—at least that's what she says in this note in her own handwriting appended to the last page of the manuscript."

"What's that?" Coroner Botts was only saying what everyone else in the room was shouting in his startled heart.

"She says he killed her." Brennan hastily scanned the pages which he held in his hand. "M-m-m—I'll read what she says—the important parts: *Henry had my prescription filled this afternoon.* M-m-m. *Narcotic tablets. But he must have altered the doctor's figures, because they're much stronger—strong enough to knock out a steer. He found that out by trying one on Joan's pet, Pedro. Nobody guessed what was the matter with Pedro. I should have recognized it as an experiment in toxicology.*"

The editor was still reading: *"I think I'll be dead in a minute or so. Before I go I want to say Joan is sane. So is her father. My dad shot Rance Seeley. Since Joan is eligible to inherit she is my sole heir. This is my holograph will. Henry loses—has killed me for nothing. My regards to him with thumb on nose. If I—"*

Brennan looked up at the breathless circle. "That's all. There's a blot where the pen must have fallen from her hand.

"At first I thought this thing"—he indicated the manuscript in his hand—"must be a joke. Then the papers said Phoebe really was dead. Seemed to me her daughter was in considerable danger. Thought I'd better take a

plane and find out. Couldn't land here but in emergency field in next town. Hurried as fast as possible. Better find Henry Dover."

"I will," said Sheriff Carver. "Deputies, meet outside at—"

The outer doors of the courthouse were flung open.

"Hey, everybody," shouted a fourteen-year-old boy who stood there. "Pitman's Homelike Funeral Parlors is on fire and most of the firemen are in here. Hurry up!"

Chapter Twenty-Five: SIAMESE TWINS TO THE RESCUE

THE CROWD POURED OUT OF THE COURTHOUSE faster than a schoolful of children at recess. In a small town no attraction can hold popular attention against an alarm of fire.

The foreman of the coroner's jury, who was also chief of the volunteer fire department, began issuing orders before he was out of the building.

"Pullers and pumpers, man the fire engine!" he shouted. "Everybody else go home and get a ladder and an ax."

"What'll we do?" yelled one of the sheriff's deputies—he happened to be in charge of Steve. "I'm number-one pumper on the port side, but I'm handcuffed to a prisoner."

"Let your prisoner go!" ordered the fire chief. "We can get another prisoner later, but the whole town's apt to be burned up if we don't hustle like Billybedam."

Sheriff Carver couldn't see it that way. "Fire or no fire, I got to keep these fellas under arrest."

The argument went on while they were all moving out with the throng. Fortunately a compromise arrangement offered itself before the conflict of authority ended in blows or bullets.

Outside the courthouse was the sheriff's old-time, open-

faced touring car. He ordered the deputies to put the two prisoners in the front seat and handcuff them together through the circle of the steering-wheel.

"I ain't got time to take you over to the jail, Steve," the sheriff apologized, "but I can't let either of you go scot-free until I get a court order. You fellas just sit there and watch us put out the fire, and then I'll come back and fix you up comfortable."

From where they sat Steve and Nels had an excellent view of the mass of flames which had once been Pitman's Homelike Funeral Parlors.

"I wonder how it caught fire?" speculated Nels idly.

"That," replied Steve, "would be a good question to ask of Hank Dover or, of course, anybody who was interested in not having an autopsy held on the body of Phoebe Dover."

Nels was startled. "What good would it do to prevent an autopsy in the face of the fact of Phoebe's own direct accusation in her handwriting on that manuscript?"

"You've forgotten," Steve reminded him, "that Henry Dover doesn't know about his sister's accusation or her holograph will. He left the inquest shortly after Doctor Blaufus dropped his bombshell, demanding an autopsy. He probably thinks he has put himself in the clear."

Nels thought that over with his eminently serviceable mind. "Then," he said finally, "if he doesn't know about Phoebe's statement, Joan is probably in more immediate danger of death than anyone in the county."

"I don't think he'd dare—" began Steve.

"I mean," interrupted Nels, "danger of death from an accident or something that looks like an accident."

Steve swore softly to himself. "I'm afraid you're right. She's all alone out at the ranch, taking care of her grandfather. The telephone is probably still out of order and—"

"Let's do something." Nels showed the first sign of

actual perturbation that Steve had so far witnessed.

"What?" Steve asked.

"I don't know, but I'd feel better if I were with her."

"You're right," Steve concurred. Then he shouted, "Sheriff! Sheriff Carver!"

At the scene of the conflagration everybody else was shouting. In the hearty democratic fashion of Americans at a fire no one paid any attention to anyone else's shouts, especially if they were orders. So no one noticed the solo and concerted pleas of Steve and Nels. Besides, the fire showed signs of spreading to near-by buildings, and there was too much crackling excitement right under everybody's nose for anyone to turn around, even if he had heard.

Steve gave up first. He sank back in his seat, the right-hand one. His eye fell on something significant on the dashboard.

"Look, Nels!" he cried. "Look! The sheriff has left his ignition key in the lock."

"Yes," agreed Nels. "What good does that do us?"

"We're going to the ranch—to get Joan." Steve reached over with his right hand and turned the key. "Step on the starter!"

"But I never drove a car," protested Nels. "I don't know how."

"And we can't change seats. That being the case, it doesn't matter whether you know how or not—you're driving this car anyway. And," he added as he stepped on the starter himself, "let this be a lesson to you."

Fortunately the starter worked.

With a running fire of instructive comment Steve helped get the ancient but heavy automobile under way. They wove back and forth, first on one side of the street and then the other, but the fire fighters didn't notice anything out of the ordinary as they went careering past the blazing building. Everybody was acting a little crazy

anyway.

Out on the open road Steve urged greater speed. "Hank has at least forty-five minutes' start on us. Of course he may not have gone to the ranch, but then again he might have done that very thing. Open her up wide."

Probably nothing less than a ride on a runaway train down the side of a mountain with all brakes out of commission could be compared with that trip to the Ring-Bar-X. The sheriff's car may have been shy on looks, but it had power and speed. Nels, who might have slowed it down a little, didn't know how. It didn't occur to Steve.

"There's where we turn," cried Nels, looking ahead to the ranch entrance, "and I don't know how to do it."

"I'll help."

Together they fought the wheel like two quartermasters on a square-rigger during a hurricane. Having one arm twisted through the spokes made it difficult to turn it very far. So they made a fairly wide careening arc, sideswiping the fence posts at the guard rails. The posts were strong and bounced the car back onto its course in the dusty road.

A couple of minutes later they arrived and, what is more, they stopped almost where they intended, in front of the main entrance of the ranch house.

"Hello, the house!" yelled Steve.

No answer.

"Joan!" he called, louder this time. "Come outside!"

Again no response.

"Some of the help ought to be around," said Nels.

"They all went to the inquest, I reckon," replied Steve.

He was being cheerful without feeling it. It would be much better, Steve felt, if someone had fired a couple of shots at them than to be met with this utter silence and inactivity. It was suspiciously like the dead calm before the rolling barrage of a surprise attack.

A couple of automobiles stood at the rear, one of them

the ranch station wagon which Joan ordinarily drove. But there was no one in either car. The doors of the huge stable stood wide open. That dirt ramp leading up to the entrance where Steve had come so near to having his neck stretched seemed to be the hunting-ground of a few clucking white hens.

At the side of the stable was a small corral. The bright, interested faces of a few good-looking horses peered at them over the split rails.

There was no other sign of life, either human or animal.

"We're here," said Steve, "but apparently nobody else is. That doesn't seem quite right to me."

"What do we do now?"

"Better investigate, I suppose."

Nels pointed with his free hand to the steering-wheel through which their wrists were linked. "How? We can't drive our chariot through the front door."

"I'm figuring that out. If this car is old enough there'll be a locknut somewhere under this wheel." He was looking for it as he spoke. "And there is. You'll notice also that, like nearly every foresighted automobilist in the wide-open spaces, the sheriff has a pair of twelve-inch pliers which he carries right in the side pocket of his car."

Steve had the wheel off from the steering-post in about three minutes. Carrying it in his left hand, which was locked to the right of Nels Gunnarson, Steve led the way to the front entrance.

He opened the screen door and, as they entered, kicked it wide with his heel. It slammed loudly.

There was no one in the main room. There was no sound in the entire house except the buzzing of a few September flies. The place looked much as it had the last time Steve had seen it. The telephone, he noted, had not yet been restored to service.

Steve and Nels went through the double swing door to the kitchen.

No one there either, although there was a good fire in the kitchen stove. Someone had fixed it not so long ago.

By tacit consent neither of the men said anything. They even proceeded on tiptoe.

Returning to the living-room, they next explored the corridor which led to the family sleeping-quarters, all but Phoebe's, which were upstairs.

There were five doors in the hallway, two on each side and one at the end. The end one was the bath; the door was ajar.

Another door stood open, the farthest one on the left side. They went to the end of the hall and looked in there first. It was undeniably Hank's room. It smelled of tobacco, and some of Hank's things were strewn on the bed.

Steve led the way from there across the hall to a closed door. That room was empty also but in perfect order.

Next they tacked across to the room next to Hank's. Behind that door lay John Dover on his bed, sleeping as peacefully as an exhausted child. The excitement and strain of the morning had taken all of his feeble strength. Life and death had that day passed over him in a flood; the passions of love and hate had stirred the dust of his existence in a devastating whirlwind. But the only result was to make him sleep. Age is merciful.

Steve closed the old man's door gently. Nothing could be gained by attempting to question him.

The other room, across the hall, was a girl's room—Joan's, presumably.

There were pleasant, dainty chintz curtains at the windows, with ruffled borders. The curtains were white, and the borders had a small figure in them—blue forget-me-nots. There was a prim three-quarter bed with a candle-wick coverlet over it, creamy white, tufted with

a middle shade of blue. The dresser had a mirror on it and there was no dressing-table. Apparently Joan stood up while she applied whatever cosmetics she wore. There were nursery-rhyme samplers in frames on the walls and a hanging bookcase contained a number of dog-eared books for children as well as some of the most recent novels. Steve thought it was nice that she had kept the teen-age books too. He had thought Joan would be like that.

Her father reminded Steve that this was no time for a daydream, no matter how pleasant the subject.

"She may have been here, but perhaps not since morning," he said.

Steve thought differently. There was a faint fragrance in the air that telegraphed her recent presence to his senses. But he couldn't explain it.

"At any rate," he acquiesced, "she's not here now. She might have gone to her mother's room."

Steve and Nels went back through the main room to the stairway and up the single flight to the closed door.

The door was not locked, however, and they pushed in.

There was no one there either.

In general the literary workroom looked exactly as when Steve had last seen it. He led his companion to the table.

Something was missing there—the box of sedative tablets! He wondered who had them—Dr. Blaufus, Hank, Paulette, or perhaps Joan. He made a mental note of it as something which must be investigated later.

There wasn't a soul in Phoebe's bedroom either, or in the connecting bath. Steve had not seen that part of Phoebe's suite before, but it naturally was familiar territory to Nels.

"Men and marriages have left little imprint here," the Swedish poet said. "In that respect the room is like Phoebe herself. It is almost exactly as I remember it."

Steve mentally applauded the man's detachment. It is not well to dwell on things or people who are gone, not unless something can be done to bring them back.

"Joan apparently is not in the house," Steve concluded.

"No, but unfortunately neither is Hank," added Nels. "That I do not like—not if they went anywhere together."

"Of course Joan doesn't know that Hank probably killed her mother," reasoned Steve. "She may not like him a lot, but I don't think she'd be especially suspicious of him."

"No, I'm afraid not," agreed Nels. "Let's go out and look somewhere else."

So Steve and Nels went out into the yard again. Steve felt of the radiators of the two automobiles standing near the kitchen door. They were both warm, although the one of the station wagon was much the cooler of the two.

"Joan brought her grandfather back in that," Steve deduced, "and Hank drove the other one home considerably later."

"Are you sure that's Hank's car?"

"I've seen him driving it."

"But with two cars at their disposal why didn't they go away in one of them?"

"We're not sure they've gone anywhere. But if they did leave, perhaps it was via a trail which is impassable for automobiles. This accident which you figure could happen might better occur somewhere far from the main highway, in a place where no one would find out about it for a long time—maybe never."

"You draw a terrifying picture for a father to behold, Steve."

"It isn't any easier for me if anybody should ask you."

"Later I *shall* ask you."

"I think," said Steve, "that our best plan right now

will be to search the back country away from the road and do it damned quick, before Hank can reach the mountains." He waved his free arm toward the distant peaks which stood silent and coldly beautiful, like the scenery painted on a stage backdrop.

"And," Steve added, "we can make better time if we borrow a couple of old John Dover's best horses."

Nels rattled the handcuff link against the automobile steering-wheel which Steve was carrying. "We'll have a lot of trouble trying to saddle horses, fastened together this way."

"Too much trouble," Steve agreed, "and we'd lose too much time. But I think we can get a divorce, or at least a legal separation. There's a blacksmith shop over by the corral. Come on and I'll try a trick a very bad man once told me about."

The blacksmith shop was really a huge shed with all sorts of ranch equipment in it, including a small tractor. The smithy part, which was right in front, consisted of a forge, an anvil, and a few sledges and mauls.

"This is fine as far as it goes," Steve conceded, "but there ought to be a cold chisel somewhere."

There wasn't though, at least not any that they could find.

Nels halted the search. "Use the wedge end of a maul and hit it with a sledge."

Steve clapped his brow in mock dismay. "And it took a poet to think up the answer! I get you."

They laid the cross member of the handcuff across the top of the anvil. Nels held the edge of the maul against the steel link while Steve, taking a short grip on the handle of an eight-pound sledge, hit the maul with all the force he could muster in his one available arm.

In ten minutes they were tired and nearly deafened by the noise, but they were free. Each still had a bracelet on one wrist and a bit of dangling chain, but the steering-

wheel lay on the floor as a symbol of emancipation.

The silence following the racket they had been making was comparable to that of an Egyptian tomb. Into that silence, like the dripping of a leaky faucet, came a faint, rhythmic sound.

Steve identified it first. "Someone on horseback." He stepped out in front of the shed. "It's Hank."

"Where?"

"Stay back there, Nels. Keep out of sight. He's seen me, but it'll be an advantage if he doesn't know there's two of us."

"I get you. I'll be behind the tractor and," he added significantly, "I'm taking the maul with me."

"Good work. Quiet now. Here he comes."

Steve himself moved a few paces out into the sunlight. He managed to tuck the steel circle of the handcuff up inside his leather wrist guard so that it did not show. He pulled the lower guard strap a little tighter to make the bracelet stay there.

By that time Hank had ridden into the ranch yard. He was dressed as he had been for the inquest, in "city clothes," except that he had put on a pair of leather chaps. Over all he wore a cartridge belt and a holster containing a long-barreled Smith and Wesson.

He sat for a moment surveying his visitor with a scowl. Then he noticed that Steve's belt holster was empty and that in the cowboy clothes Steve was wearing there was no possibility of concealing a weapon under his arm. Then Hank smiled.

"How in the name of the twelve Apostles did you get here?"

"I came in Sheriff Carver's car." Steve waved an arm toward the old automobile parked near the living-room door.

"Oh, is the sheriff in the house?" Hank dismounted and dropped his bridle reins on the ground.

"No, the sheriff isn't here. I merely borrowed his car. He doesn't know I've got it."

Hank allowed a grin to spread over his features. "If you took that car without Carver's permission he'll be along with a posse pretty soon." He laughed with what to Steve seemed almost genial amusement. "He's pretty partial to that old coffee grinder of his."

"The sheriff doesn't know I've left town yet; he's so busy at the fire." Steve watched Hank closely as he said that.

"The fire? What fire?"

Hank said it just right—with exactly the correct amount of surprise and curiosity. He was either a very good actor or he actually didn't know what had happened.

"Pitman's burned down," Steve explained.

"The funeral parlor? Did they get Phoebe out?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't think so. The building was nearly gone before anyone noticed it."

"What a pity!" The big man's concern seemed quite real. Steve almost believed that Hank was shocked into a semblance of human emotion. "I don't suppose I could have done any good if I had stayed. Still, I wish I had hung around. After I found out the bad news about Dad I thought I ought to come home and help look after him. I knew that since I was on horseback it would take quite a while, even by using the short cut through the canyon."

Abruptly the wall of suspicion and mistrust rose again around Steve's mind. If Hank was just getting home via the canyon trail, who had so recently driven Hank's automobile?

"By the way," said Hank in a continuation of his mood of human friendliness, "I and all the other Dovers owe you an apology for what so nearly happened to you the other night. I guess it'll take us all the rest of our lives to make up to you for our mistake."

Steve could scarcely believe his ears; in fact, he didn't believe them. This was too far out of character—for Hank Dover to be apologizing to a Seeley and even offering to make amends. The soft soap must be an offering to cover up a flank attack. Steve still thought it would be a mistake to turn his back.

Hank continued in his genial mood: "Now that you're here, what can I do for you?"

"I came to get Joan. Her father wanted me to break the news about the fire—and her mother and everything—sort of gently."

"Oh, I see. Did you talk to her?"

"No, she isn't here."

"She must be. She left the inquest to take her grandfather home. Probably she's busy with him. I'll call her out." Hank let out a terrific shout. "Joan! Joan! Where are you?"

There was not even an echo.

"I don't understand this." Hank was talking partly to himself. "She must have arrived by this time, unless Father was taken desperately ill somewhere along the line and—"

"Your father is here," said Steve dryly. He was sure he was telling the big rancher something that he knew perfectly well already.

"That's right," Hank admitted. "There's the station wagon Joan drove him home in. You don't think she'd go off her nut and wander away, do you? Or harm herself? The poor kid has had a lot of trouble all in a bunch." Hank was beginning to work up considerable agitation. "I'm going to look for her in the house myself. She might be somewhere, crying her eyes out. D'ye want to come with me?"

Steve didn't care particularly for Hank's society but, on the other hand, he wanted to have him in sight. If he stayed outside Steve had the feeling that it would be

too easy to take a pot shot at him through a window.

So he went along while Hank went through the motions of searching the ranch house. Nothing turned up which Steve had not seen before.

When they emerged into the open air once more Hank was full of protestations of anxiety. "I'm sure the kid'll turn up all right, but I've got to admit I wish she'd do it soon. If anything happened to her—" He broke off in a sudden access of emotion. "Why, I love Joan as if she was my own daughter—my poor sister's baby!"

Steve would have been inclined to believe him if it had not been for that written accusation of Phoebe's, that damning dead finger which Hank did not know was pointing at him. As it was, it seemed to Steve that Hank was putting on a very hammy act.

"It takes a thing like this to make us realize that we all belong to one big family, and the name of it is humanity." Hank rather liked that one as it left his lips, and he embroidered it. "Here we are, me a Dover and you a Seeley, Steve, ready one minute to spring at each other's throats. Then a little sorrow and trouble hits us, and all we think of is how we can help each other." He reached into his pocket. Steve thought first it was for his handkerchief, but it was his plug of tobacco that Hank pulled out. He offered it to Steve, who declined, and then bit off a chunk.

"Frankly," Hank said when he could articulate again, "I don't know anywhere else to hunt for Joan. I think if we just sit down and wait she'll turn up before long."

"She might, at that," Steve conceded, "but I'm one of those nervous individuals who likes to be doing something while he's resting. I believe I'll take a look over there on the floor of the canyon."

"But I just came home that way," Hank pointed out.

"I know. But you weren't looking for anything special. I will be."

Chapter Twenty-Six: MURDER OFF THE CUFF

HANK DOVER, in his character of friend and helpful host, could do nothing less than offer Steve a horse.

"I'll go with you," he said further. "There isn't a fissure or a rock in that slit in the ground that I don't know. When I was a youngster—"

"Phoebe told me," Steve interrupted briefly. "You used to play there together."

"That's right," Hank agreed heartily. "We did. Poor little Phoebe."

Steve thought of the Nile and crocodiles.

Hank cut out and saddled one of the larger horses in the corral and told Steve to adjust the stirrups and tighten the cinch while he got a bag of feed out of the barn.

"It'll take quite a while if we do a good job," Hank explained, "and we'll give the nags a few oats first time we stop to rest."

While Hank was in the barn Steve worked his way over to the blacksmith shop and, under the guise of talking to his mount, conveyed suggestions to Nels, who was doubtless getting somewhat cramped behind the tractor.

"Easy now, fella," Steve said soothingly. "We'll be goin' down the canyon trail in a minute and we want everything tight so it won't slip. Might not get all the way to town—whoa there—but somebody ought to. We might need help, wouldn't we, hoss? Yes, sir, plenty of help."

Hank came out carrying two grain sacks with the open ends tied together. They were each about a third full. Even that was enough for several days' feed for two horses, but Steve made no comment.

Hank threw them across Steve's saddle blanket, just

in front of the pommel. "I'll let your animile carry the extra load. Mine's still a little winded yet from coming up the trail." He mounted. "Lead on, Steve."

For the fraction of a second Steve hesitated. He didn't like a little bit the idea of riding in front of a man who didn't like him and had a gun to back it up.

Because by now Steve had no illusions about this searching party in the canyon. Hank had agreed to it entirely too readily. To Steve's pessimistically suspicious mind it seemed as if Hank must have perceived in the search for Joan an opportunity to get Steve himself off in some lonely place and leave him there for the buzzards.

Steve definitely did not want to ride in front of the only gun in the party.

Hank got the idea. "I'll go first if you like. It'll be better that way anyhow. I know the trail."

They reached the rim of the canyon in about twenty minutes. Except for the fact that there was a trail of hoof prints leading to it, there was little evidence that there was any way to get down.

Here again Hank led the way. There was nothing for Steve to do but give his horse his head and let him follow. The helpfulness of his guide almost quieted Steve's suspicions. The edge of the canyon wall would have been a perfectly natural place for an accident. A slight push and a horse and rider could have been toppled over. Or merely startling the horse might have caused him to pitch Steve into eternity. But nothing had happened.

Perhaps Hank was being on the level after all. If Steve had not been a confirmed pessimist he would finally have adopted that conclusion.

At the bottom of the precipitous trail it was very still. Erosion had left fantastic red rock monuments standing on the floor of the canyon—a gallery of gigantic sculptured gods and goddesses thinking eternally of the days before history and indifferent to the puny presence of

the vanishing race of men.

The horses would have paused to nibble at the wisps of greenery that cropped out here and there in crevices of the rock, but Hank urged that they proceed with the search at once.

"If you really want to cover the canyon thoroughly," he advised, "we'd better get right at it. There's about eight or nine miles of it between here and town, and there's a lot of places where a body could be hidden."

"A body?" repeated Steve. "You don't think Joan is dead, do you?"

"Well," reasoned Hank, "if she isn't she'd come home somehow." He turned sidewise in his saddle. "Just what do *you* think has happened to her?"

"I don't know," Steve answered, "but whatever we find, it had better not be a body."

They started out. Steve overruled Hank's suggestion that they separate and each cover one side of the canyon. "I'd rather have you with me," he said ingenuously. "As you were saying back at the ranch, you know the ground so much better than I do. If I was working alone I might miss something."

Hank seemed to take no offense at the suspicion which he must have felt lurking behind that implausible explanation.

They zigzagged back and forth over the rock-and-gravel bottom of that somehow forbidding-looking dark red gash in the earth. It all went so smoothly and easily that Steve at the end of half an hour was pretty well convinced that they were on a very false trail indeed. Hank would certainly not have been so cheerfully helpful if he had a guilty secret and they were anywhere near hitting upon a solution of it.

But Steve kept stubbornly on. This was the only lead of any sort that he had. Hank had almost certainly driven home from town in his automobile. After that

he had gone to the canyon. Steve had seen Hank coming from there. Why? Joan was missing. Therefore her uncle's trip away from the ranch house must have had something to do with her departure.

But another quarter of an hour of fruitless search finally convinced Steve that he was wasting time. If Hank had only seemed a little worried he would have thought that they were on the right track. But Hank was not worried at all. They were halfway to town now, and the canyon was much wider, too wide for intensive search without a large number of men to help.

"I give up," Steve said. "We'd better mark this place and go for help. We'll have to have a dozen men."

"That's what I think," concurred Hank. "The boys will be back from the inquest by this time, I expect. Let's go back to the ranch house and eat. Then we'll start out fresh after that with all the help we can get. Besides, maybe she's home by now."

That also had occurred to Steve. He started to turn his horse's head.

"What's that over there at the right," he asked idly, "near the Dover rim of the canyon?"

"What's what?"

"Looks like a wooden signboard."

"Oh, that's just a warning we stuck up for tourists. There's an abandoned mine shaft there, and strangers used to fall into it until we put some wire around it and nailed a hand-lettered sign on a post right near the hole so they can't miss it."

Without saying anything Steve deflected his course to ride past the sign. It was not far out of their way.

As they drew nearer Steve saw that the signpost was surrounded by a fence of barbed wire fastened to quite high posts set up in the pattern of a square. The sides of the square were about twenty-five feet each way. In the middle was a hole in the ground, also square, shored

up around the sides to a curbing a foot high. This hole was approximately six feet across. The end of an old ladder stuck up above the curbing, and to it was nailed the sign Hank had spoken about.

It read: *Danger! Keep Out! Abandoned Mine Shaft.*

The sign was weather-beaten, and the wooden timbers around the shaft looked old. The fence, however, was new.

"I suppose," said Steve, "that we ought to look in there."

"Just as you say, Steve." It was strange how much Steve resented Hank's recently adopted use of his first name. In the West everybody gets rid of ceremonial address almost immediately after forming an acquaintance, but Steve would have preferred to be on more distant terms with this man who he felt instinctively was hostile.

Still, his willingness to investigate the mine shaft threw Steve off guard. Surely if he knew there was anything wrong about it Hank wouldn't be quite so casual. He couldn't be that good an actor.

Steve was impatient also to try other fields that might be more promising. Hank's ready acquiescence in the plan to look into the mine shaft convinced Steve that it was a cold trail. He was about to announce his intention of going on with the original plan of returning to the ranch when his eye caught a fluttering bit of light-colored cloth which was impaled on a barb in one of the wire strands of the fence. It could be where a girl had climbed through and torn her dress.

Steve's heart jumped. But he showed no outward sign. He did not even call Hank's attention to his discovery. Perhaps the latter had not seen it.

Hank was saying as he dismounted, "There isn't much chance Joan would go down the shaft. She knows there's nothing there."

"I don't believe myself that she'd 'go down,'" replied Steve, "but she might have been taken down. I think I'll look."

That was practically an accusation, but Hank took no umbrage. "I'll give the broncs a dish of oats while you have a look-see." He took the grain bags from the saddle of Steve's horse.

Steve straddled into the enclosure between the wires. The ladder was old, homemade, and of the straight up-and-down variety, two-by-fours for sides and one-by-four crossbar rungs, all nailed to the wooden timbers of the side of the shaft.

"Watch out for a step about halfway down," Hank warned. "I haven't been in there since last year, but it was loose then and may have fallen off."

But Steve found none of the cross slats missing, although he tried each one gingerly before he trusted his weight on it.

There were sixty-eight steps. For some reason Steve counted them. He had thought there would be more.

The bottom of the shaft was covered with coarse decomposed granite. From the shaft, through a heavily timbered bulkhead, led a drift or horizontal tunnel.

Steve started to walk into that tunnel but discovered, after he had gone six or eight feet, that the passageway was closed off by a heavy door. When his eyes had become accustomed to the dim illumination that reached the corridor from the bottom of the shaft, he perceived that the door which was as wide as the tunnel itself was hinged at the top. At the bottom of the door were two handholds, one on either side of the center, and a heavy hook between them. Overhead in the timber was set a ring or eye into which the hook apparently fitted when the door stood open.

Steve stooped to raise the door. He took one handhold in each hand and pulled out and up.

Nothing happened. The door stirred a little in its frame, but that was all.

It did not seem to be fastened in any way. Sheer weight was apparently all that kept the door in place. Steve rather prided himself on his strength. He tried again. No success.

Perhaps there was a trick to it.

Steve stepped back to the bottom of the shaft and called up, "Hey there, aloft!"

A head appeared over the top. "What is it, Steve?" The voice was still the blandly affable one of Hank Dover in his impersonation of a gentle Santa Claus watching over the welfare of all the little children in the world.

"There's a door here in the tunnel," Steve told him. "I can't get it open."

"Gee, is that thing closed? We usually leave it open. I'll have to come down and help you open it. It takes at least two men."

Steve could believe that.

Hank climbed down the ladder. He had the grain sacks slung over his shoulder.

"I forgot to put 'em down," he explained. "Now let's see about this swing door. I'll bet it has rusted in place."

Hank tried it alone. It didn't budge. "I could do that when I was twenty-one," he boasted ruefully. "Take a grip on that side."

Together they raised the door with little difficulty, and Hank fastened the hook in the ceiling.

"I'll wait for you here," Hank suggested, "unless you'd rather I went along."

"It doesn't make any difference. Have you any matches?"

Hank laughed. "Got a pocket full of 'em. Smoke a pipe when I'm in the house. It's more elegant than chawing."

He handed over a score of wooden matches. "Anything else?"

"Let me borrow your gun."

Hank hesitated. "What for? Ain't scared of the dark, are you?"

"Yes—in a strange place." It seemed simpler than to say that he did not want a man with a revolver in back of him.

"All right, Steve. Here she is."

Steve slipped the gun into his empty holster. He hadn't expected Hank to grant that request. Maybe he was unjust in his estimate of the man after all. He couldn't be wrong, and yet—

Steve entered the part of the tunnel which was beyond the bulkhead door. The floor was level, and he could see well enough without using any of the matches.

It was still not entirely dark when his foot struck something soft and yielding and he fell forward, landing on his outstretched hands.

From beneath him came a pitiful groan.

Steve knew what he'd found. Even that faint odor would have told him, if all of his other senses had not.

"Hank!" he yelled, forgetting everything in his excitement. "She's here. Joan's here."

"Are you sure?" boomed Hank's heavy voice from the mouth of the tunnel.

"Yes. But she's hurt. You'll have to help me."

"Just a minute."

Steve turned his head to look back in the direction from which he had come. That was where the light was. Silhouetted against it was the huge black bulk of Hank. His hands were upraised.

Suddenly Steve knew what Hank was doing. He was unfastening the hook which held up the door.

Steve turned completely around, still on one knee, drew the revolver from its holster, and pressed the

trigger.

The trigger snapped.

He tried again, six times in all, with no results.

The door dropped with a crash.

The tunnel was in complete darkness.

Steve realized with bitter ruefulness what he probably should have guessed before—that the entire farce had been planned in advance. Hank had doubtless removed the bullets from his gun before he ever put his foot on the top rung of the ladder to descend to Steve's assistance. More than likely he would have offered Steve the weapon if the latter had not guilelessly asked for it.

There was no question now but that Hank had deliberately let Steve find the mine shaft himself so that he would descend without suspicion and thus put himself absolutely at his enemy's mercy.

Just what Hank intended to do next Steve couldn't guess. Perhaps he would dynamite the shaft. By the time help ever got to them in the tunnel Joan and he would be dead.

It was clearly a time for action, not speculation. Steve retraced his steps as rapidly as was possible in the pitch-black darkness to the bulkhead door. He crouched low for the greatest possible leverage and pushed.

There was no more chance of opening the heavy barrier from the inside than from the outside—not without help.

And there was no help.

As he swore in futile exasperation Steve thought he heard faint, mirthless laughter. Perhaps he imagined that.

While he was still crouched low against the door a sharp odor stung his throat and nostrils. He had the impulse to cough.

There was something in the air!

It was an odor which came from some source near by

and which was rapidly becoming stronger.

It might be an inflammable gas, but Steve thought it was something worse than that.

He had to take the risk of its being explosive in order to find out quickly.

Steve lighted one of his matches.

On the floor of the tunnel, just inside the bulkhead door, was piled a mound of reddish brown powder, quite a large quantity. It was something which had not been there when he entered the tunnel. Steve knew where it had come from. Those grain bags! There had doubtless been several sealed cans in each bag.

There was no use in speculating as to what it was. No matter what its chemical formula it was something that generated an irritating gas which was also probably fatal to animal life. Steve suspected that it was a commercial pest destroyer composed mostly of hydrocyanic acid, which he had read about as being in common use for fumigating stables, ships, and even orchards.

He need no longer fear an explosion. Death lay right there at his feet.

Steve looked around for something with which to cover up the powder in order to delay the action. The walls and floor were bare hard rock. It would even be impossible to scrape up any gravel from the floor. Porous material like that would have been useless anyway. The gas could go right through.

Steve took off his heavy outside shirt and his sombrero and placed them on the damnably innocent-looking mound of dust. They might slow down the action a little.

Hank was still being pretty clever. If Steve and Joan were both found dead in the tunnel there was nothing to prove that he had a hand in it—not if the discovery were not made until a few hours later, when the powder had become gas and the gas had filtered away through the earth.

As far as Hank knew, no one was aware that he and Steve had gone to the canyon together. Nels could tell the sheriff the truth, but even then it would be hard to prove a charge of foul play.

Yes, Hank must be thinking that he was absolutely safe now, with all his tracks covered.

The knowledge that Hank's feeling of safety would be abruptly punctured when he found out that he was accused of murdering his sister was no consolation to Steve now.

He stumbled back to where he had left Joan. When he thought he was near he lit another match to make sure not to stumble across her again.

There she was, limp, pale, disheveled. On her face were several ugly bruises and scratches; her dress was ripped and torn, and her right leg was doubled up under her in an unnatural position.

But she was alive. Her breast rose and fell slightly with the rhythm of breathing. Steve checked his exclamation of thankfulness that she still lived. To be living, he thought, might not be a blessing at all, not with death creeping down the corridor on stealthy, silent feet.

The match burned out and scorched his fingers, but still Steve did not move.

Hot tears of anger welled to his eyes. He sank to his knees beside her.

"Oh, little Joan, what has he done to you?"

"Steve," she whispered faintly.

He was startled. "I didn't think you were conscious."

"Yes, ever since I knew—since I knew you had found me." She paused. "Those are your tears on my cheek, aren't they?"

"Yes. But don't talk, Joan. Save your strength."

"For what? The door is closed, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And he has strewn cyanogas on the floor, hasn't he?"

"How did you know?"

"He said he'd be back with it. We have very little time, I think. Put something under my head, Steve, so I can speak more easily."

It was his arm that he put there, and he raised her to a half-reclining position.

A sharp exclamation of pain escaped her.

"What is it?"

"My leg. It's broken."

"How?"

"He broke it—after he brought me down here. So it would look as if I'd had an accident, he said."

Steve swore prayerfully. "And God has let him live. You poor child."

"No, Steve, not a child. The gas is getting stronger, isn't it?" She tried to raise her arm but failed. "Hold me a little closer, Steve, and say good-by. It'll be for whoever you love out there."

He made no move.

"Is it too big a trick for your imagination?" There was a trace of raillery in her voice even through the pain.

"There's no one I love out there."

"I thought—I can't hang on any longer, Steve. I'm going to faint."

He bent his head and touched her lips. He thought they responded imperceptibly under his own. Steve kissed her again, really this time.

Then with sudden remorse he drew back. "My sweet, look what I've done."

"What?" she whispered, "what have you done?"

"I've kissed you when you're hurt and faint and unable to struggle."

"My dear"—her voice was faint but clear—"aren't you being old-fashioned? Haven't you guessed that I wouldn't struggle no matter if—? Listen!"

There was a lot of noise at the end of the tunnel,

pounding on the door and shouts from outside.

Then as they looked the dim but blessed daylight came in.

The door was going up.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: DEADLY PRIZEFIGHT

HANK DOVER, when he had unfastened and dropped the bulkhead door, waited a moment to see what happened. He heard Steve's attempts to raise the heavy barrier and his sudden coughing and sneezing.

Satisfied that everything was working all right, Hank bit off a piece of chewing-tobacco for himself and in leisurely fashion began to climb the sixty-eight steps to the top of the shaft.

With each step he shed more of his worries about the past. There was little chance that anything could ever be proved against him either in this convenient erasure—in one apparently unavoidable accident—of his niece and, by a fortunate chance, the man he hated most, or in the earlier matter of Phoebe's death. People might suspect, but suspicion would not much harm the richest man in Outlaw County, perhaps the richest man in the state. If gossip bothered him he could leave and take up his existence somewhere else.

Yes, life grew brighter as he neared the real and brilliant sunshine at the top of the shaft.

Lost in his own pleasant thoughts, Hank stepped completely out of the shaft before he noticed that anything had changed since he went underground.

It was quite a change too.

All four sides of the square barbed-wire enclosure were lined with the heads of mildly inquisitive horses. And on the back of each horse was somebody by the name of Seeley, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

No one said anything. Even the horses did not whinny.

Every eye, man's and beast's, watched Hank.

From the corner of Hank's mouth dribbled a little stream of brown-stained saliva.

Scott and Sears dismounted and went down the ladder. No one said anything even then.

Nor when they came up.

Steve carried Joan across his shoulders, her broken leg dangling. She was entirely unconscious now.

Steve handed her across the top of the fence to her father. Nels took her away somehow. Steve found out later that Nels and one of the Seeleys improvised a stretcher out of a saddle blanket and carried her on foot part way to town, while another of the boys rode ahead and got an ambulance to meet them.

Scott and Sears were still inside the barbed-wire enclosure with Steve and Hank.

Hank was over by the shaft, leaning against the ladder, chewing and spitting. He had himself under control now.

"We've got a horse for you, Steve," said Scott.

"Thanks. I'll use it later. Right now I've got some business to settle. If you don't mind, get outside of the wire, will you?"

"Sure, sure," agreed Sears. "Anything to oblige you—and Hank Dover."

They clambered through the fence and mounted their horses.

Steve took off his undershirt and his chaps. He left the wrist guards on.

A light of understanding flickered in Hank's watchful eye. Also a gleam of hope. He stripped to the waist as Steve had done.

There was a smile on his face as he looked up at the canyon rim. He laughed.

The men surrounding the barbed-wire square looked up too.

Half a hundred horsemen were there, cowboys armed

with rifles and revolvers, motionless.

There was a restless stir in the crowd around the mine shaft. Some guns were raised.

"Cut it, you damn fools," ordered Scott. Then he shouted to the cowboys on the rim. "How about it up there? Any objections?"

"None," called back Albany.

Another cowboy yelled, "We're standin' by for fair play."

Steve walked slowly toward Hank. Once more that sense of detachment, which glassed him in at a crisis, chilled his mind. He knew what he was about to do but he was also going to stand at one side, watching himself do it.

Hank stood in readiness, waiting. He was a huge man, hard-muscled, long-armed, and had a barrel with hair on it for a chest.

But Steve was not conscious of not equaling the other man in height or reach. If he thought at all about the balance of physical conditions it was to the effect that he was quicker on his feet.

Steve's other and greatest advantage was that in his mind's eye was the recollected picture of a girl with a battered face and a broken leg. There are some actions which civilized men do not countenance in other men.

Steve did not spar but struck his first blow with all his might.

Hank partially blocked it, but Steve had put so much force behind the punch that it bore down his opponent's raised forearm, and Steve's fist caromed glancingly off from Hank's right eye.

Hank protected himself from a repetition by crouching and coming in under Steve's guard, his two heavy fists striking Steve's chest and right side in swift succession.

"You asked for it," Hank said, and then added taunt-

ingly, "If I thought you were going to live I'd offer to show you how to do that someday when— Oof!"

The wind he was wasting went out in one blast as Steve ceased dancing around and went through a wide-open path that he had found, which led directly to the solar plexus.

Hank took it standing but shifted his chewing-tobacco from his left to his right cheek. Just in time, too, because Steve hit him there, and the padding may have helped.

"Save your strength, Steve," cautioned the voice of one who knew, Skippy McGinn. "Make him rush you."

"Shut up!" said the voice that always told Skippy what to do.

Still, Steve knew that Skippy's advice was good, and he began thriftily to take advantage of it. This was going to be no three-minute round with a convenient bell to give him a chance to get a deep breath once in a while. When this fight was over Steve suspected that somebody was probably going to be lifted out over the barbed wire.

So instead of rapidly circling around with Hank as a pivot, as he had been doing, Steve kept his feet in one place for a while and wove sideways with his torso and ducked with his head and neck. He took a couple of body blows that way which he might have missed otherwise, but on the whole he was probably not so near that point of leaden weariness which comes at the limit of a man's endurance.

Steve even gave way a little, merely using his strength to block everything that Hank swung at him. That was perhaps a mistake. Hank followed his apparent advantage closely and with a couple of punches, not very damaging in themselves, managed to shove Steve into the barbed wire.

The sensation of swift burning was like having lighted gunpowder fuses racing across his back. Steve suppressed an exclamation of pain but involuntarily leaped forward.

He had to come right into Hank's fist, which hit him on the chin at the same time that Hank raised his knee and caught him in the groin.

Steve fell back against the forked lightnings of the barbed wire once more. But he scarcely felt them this time; the other pain was so much greater. Steve knew he had to recover before he took any more punishment, and he hung onto the wire with arms outstretched on both sides, just as if it had been the spring-supported white cotton rope of a regular prize-fight arena. Hank was so amused by Steve's agony that he laughed and then, insolently, squirted a stream of tobacco juice in his face.

At that Steve's mental and muscular reactions meshed into gear once more, and he came back, but lower this time, and fought his way out of the zone of the lacerating wire. He could feel the blood trickling down his back from a dozen deep scratches, but he did not think he would lose enough of it to affect him materially. Cuts and rips on his skin had the faculty of starting to heal almost as soon as the first cleansing bleeding was over. Nevertheless, he thought it would be a good idea to fight cautiously for a few minutes while he took stock of his injuries.

From ringside and gallery came a sigh of relaxed tension as the two men in this most dangerous squared circle sparred warily with each other for several minutes.

The spectators on horseback did not know what Hank was trying to do, but Steve sensed it even before the other made his first forthright move. Hank, Steve guessed, encouraged by his success in bouncing Steve against the wire, was going to attempt to make the next rush at a time when Steve had his back to the curbing of the mine shaft. By throwing Steve off balance at just the proper moment Hank could push him over the curbing and down the shaft itself. Sixty-eight steps, Steve figured, foolishly, because it didn't make any difference; that was approximately seventy-five feet, about the same as

eight floors of a building. Enough.

Hank's intentions were obvious. He let Steve lunge past him and then closed in behind so that he himself faced the shaft. Steve had to turn his back to the pit or get hit from behind.

Steve was still a little groggy from the blow in the groin and from hitting the wire, and he had a feeling that he couldn't take the full force of Hank's crashing attack—not for a minute anyway.

So when Hank came on wide open, Steve shifted swiftly to football tactics and tackled him around the knees. Both of them went down, but now Hank was nearer the perilous center of the ring than Steve was.

Steve thought it was his opportunity. He scrambled to his feet first, and when Hank got up he began to batter him with face and body blows.

But Hank didn't budge. There didn't seem to be any kind of physical beating that he couldn't take. He knew what Steve had in mind and he laughed in Steve's face. There was no question but that in this kind of fight Hank's superior height, weight, and reach counted. Quickness of thinking and even of action could not prevail against sheer brute ability to take a licking.

Physically Hank couldn't lose. Both men knew that.

The men on horseback around the square sensed that the odds against Steve were increasing, and they shifted restlessly in their saddles.

"Hey there!" said Sears finally, unable to control his anxiety any longer. "Don't you fellas want to call this a draw?"

"Keep out o' this," panted Steve. "There can't be any draw."

Hank laughed. "And keep out, besides, because my boys up there on the rim'll blow you to hell if you don't."

What Hank and the spectators did not know was that, although with the vitality odds the way they were Hank

couldn't lose, Steve couldn't lose either. That was because to Steve this had suddenly become the end of life. If God wanted him to go on further there would have to be a miracle. Otherwise he intended to let this be the finish. With one condition attached to it. When he went, Hank was going with him.

Steve planned craftily. Sparring and blocking automatically, he let his mind work it out. He figured exactly what grip he would take so that it couldn't be broken.

At last all set, he deliberately let Hank maneuver him into position with his back to the open shaft once more. Hank had worked so hard doing this that his wind was pretty well gone. But there was a light of triumph in his eye as he closed with Steve, grappled, and forced him back to the built-up curbing.

Just as they reached the edge in a silence that was more prayerfully eloquent than a gasp, Steve put all the strength he had been saving into a two-handed grip around Hank's throat, both thumbs on his Adam's apple.

Steve made no other effort whatever, just allowed himself to fall over the edge.

It was Steve's turn to laugh now as he saw the look of surprise and consternation on Hank's face. He tried to break Steve's grip, but he had waited too long. That grip was all Steve had to think about. But Hank had to try to breathe, and now in addition to that he had to brace himself against being dragged over the edge.

Hank's back and hips were a tremendous crane for lifting, but they were overloaded now. Gradually he began to bend forward. He sank to his knees.

And then with a sudden convulsion Hank put forth what amounted to a final heartbreaking effort and with one mighty heave lifted Steve clear of the shaft and dropped him on the ground beside it.

That was a startling interlude in a struggle which a moment before had seemed to be about to end in the

death of both combatants. There was a swift guarded exchange of questions and answers among the ringside spectators.

Finally Scott stopped it. "Steve said to keep out. He's the head man in the Seeley family."

Steve released his grip on Hank's throat and stood up, looking down at the vast, gasping bulk of his adversary. Hank was for the moment completely at his mercy.

Steve leaned against the top part of the ladder which stood above ground and waited. There was no hurry now. The miracle had happened.

Hank did not realize that Steve was giving him as much time as he needed, so as soon as he could he rolled away from the shaft.

Steve, in leisurely fashion, followed and stood near, still waiting.

Hank couldn't stand the suspense. He rose to his feet. Steve hit him twice, once on each eye. Hank went down but only to rise again and clinch with Steve.

The latter broke it with a terrific body blow.

As they separated Hank swung a long-armed roundhouse.

But he aimed it at the empty air! Steve was in back of him!

Steve knew what had happened. Hank was no longer able to see. Perhaps it was partly because of the strangulation grip Steve had used on him at the shaft, or maybe it was the smack-smack that Steve had just planted the moment before.

At any rate Hank ran in a crazy circle, flailing with his arms.

As he approached the fence the horses backed away, frightened. Hank went head first into the wire, tearing deep gashes in his face and shoulders.

"Stop him!" cried Steve. "He's blind. Keep him away from that wire."

Men were dismounting from their horses to answer Steve's call.

Steve himself, being nearest and inside the wire, ran after Hank and tried to hold him.

But Hank rained blows on Steve's face. And the blood and perspiration on Hank's shoulders made him too slippery to hold.

He twisted from Steve's grasp and went whirling away, his fists striking out at nothing.

"Hank!" implored Steve. "Look out!"

But Steve was addressing the empty air.

The earth had swallowed his enemy.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: PERMANENT CUSTODY

BY THE TIME STEVE HAD BEEN PATCHED UP by the nurse in charge at the emergency hospital on the rodeo grounds, Scott, who had investigated personally, reported that Henry Dover had apparently died instantaneously from a broken neck and back.

Sheriff Carver called for Steve. "You'll have to stay in jail tonight, at least until we have another inquest. And after that there's a little matter of stealing an automobile and destroying county property, to wit, one pair of handcuffs."

The sheriff's car seemed no worse for wear after its wild trip over the highways and byways, guided by Nels Gunnarson's untrained hands. The sheriff offered Steve the seat beside him.

"We're makin' a little detour on the way to jail," Sheriff Carver explained after he had blown the breath of life into his ancient carriage. "Joan Gunnarson wanted I should fetch you to where she is so she could see for herself that her father ain't lyin' to her about the falseness of the rumor of your untimely demise."

Steve had a little panic. "Gee, Sheriff, I can't call on

Joan looking like this, all patched up."

"Steve, don't you worry about looking kinda second-hand. You wait till you see her."

As a matter of fact, there was very little of Joan that he could see. She was in the spare room at Scott Seeley's house, and Dr. Blaufus was still sticking bits of adhesive plaster on her here and there when Steve was ushered in.

Nels sat on the other side of the bed, across from the doctor.

Dr. Blaufus got up. "There," he said. "I guess mebbe that you will be all right until a regular doctor can be sobered up enough to do a good job."

For once Joan had no words for the old veterinary. She was looking at Steve.

It didn't seem unnatural to sink to his knees beside the bed. Nor to pick up her hand and touch it with his lips.

With that hand she pulled him nearer.

Steve looked across at Nels.

"It's all right, Steve; she's told me."

Steve hesitated. "Joan, dear, if it's something I don't know, tell me too."

"You do know, my dumb cluck; it's 'I love you.' "

As they kissed, Paulette, who had entered unobtrusively, said, "I saw him first, but who am I to run opposition to Romeo and Juliet? Come on, Nels, I'll buy you a couple of glasses of vitamins."

"But—" objected the sheriff.

"You come along, too, Sheriff. It'll be harder for him to get away from her than from any jail in the Western Hemisphere."

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